Does revolutionary politics reconfigure Islamist[[1]](#footnote-1) women’s agency? The case of the Muslim Sisters in Egypt (2011-2013)

**Introduction**

Despite the rich scholarship in English on the Muslim Brotherhood, there is a paucity of research exclusively focused on the Muslim Sisters. The Muslim Sisters however, have historically played a central role to the growth of the Muslim Brothers in terms of community outreach, recruitment and mobilization. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the very survival of the Muslim Brothers rested on the role of the Muslim Sisters in preventing the movement from complete obliteration in the 1950s and 1960s and then again in providing the resilience, resistance and resourcefulness when the movement faced a systematic crackdown from the government in 2013 onwards. The political successes of the Muslim Brothers in particular in the elections of 2005 and 2011 have been attributed to the mass mobilization of the women’s agency of the Muslim Brothers.

This paper seeks to examine the agency and ideology of the Muslim Sisters in a contextualized and historicized manner with a particular focus on the question of whether the reconfiguration of power dynamics generated by the Egyptian revolution of 2011 influenced the gender hierarchy within the Muslim Brotherhood. While a related topic, due to space limitations, the paper does not discuss the gender policies championed by the Muslim Brotherhood which is the topic of a separate paper.

The paper is organized as follows: following this introduction which discusses the definitional and methodological approach and its limitations as well as writer’s own positionality and standpoint; the second part discusses the conceptual contestations around the Muslim Sisters in relation to both authoritarianism and piety movements. These will be revisited in the conclusion. The second part historicizes the Muslim Sisters, their organizational positioning. The third part discusses the agency of the Muslim Sisters in and out of the movement between 2012-2013.

**Navigating definitional complexity and methodological dilemmas**

The absence of academic literature on the Muslim Sisters is on account of a number of movement-and context- specific factors. First, when the Muslim Brothers sought to assume a role in the political life of Egypt, it was members of the political bureau of the movement that were placed in the limelight and they all happed to be men. Second, the Muslim Brothers lived many decades under controlled tolerance subject to periods of imprisonment and repression and hence they sought to spare women members becoming security targets. Third, as will be discussed below, because the Muslim Sisters ae subsumed under the Muslim Brothers, the latter have served as their gatekeepers and have therefore kept a tight lid on who has access to insider knowledge on the agential and organizational dynamics. Finally, the Muslim Sisters are conscious that the Muslim Brothers have been under attack in parts of academia and the media for their position on women’s equality and this has undeniably put them in a defensive position.

It may be worthwhile to start with a definition of the Muslim Brotherhood, the oldest religious movement with a vision to establish an Islamic governance (Shariah, Islamic canonical law]) implemented through a modern state system. Hassan el Banna the founder who established the movement in 1928 provided the most comprehensive, holistic definition of the Muslim Brothers:

A Salafi[[2]](#footnote-2) call (da‘wa ): because they call for returning Islam to its purist meaning from God’s Book and the Sunnah of his Prophet

A Sunni way (tariqa): because they take it upon themselves to work according to the pure Sunna in all things especially in beliefs, ’badat, whenever they find a way for that

A Sufi truth: because they know the essence of goodness is purity of soul and purity of heart and persistence in work [……]

A political entity: because they call for the reform of internal government, and the revision of the Islamic Ummah[[3]](#footnote-3)’s relations with other nations [….]

A sports group: because they care about their bodies and believe that a strong believer is better than a weak one [………]

A scientific, cultural solidarity: because Islam makes the quest for knowledge a fareeda(ordinance from God) for every Muslim man and woman and because the Muslim Brotherhood clubs are in reality schools for education and enculturation and institutes for pedagogy for the body, mind and spirit.

A commercial company […]

A social idea: because they are concerned with the ills of Islamic society and they try to reach ways of remedying and healing the Ummah from them

(Amin 2006).

This all-encompassing nature of the movement as envisaged by Hassan el Banna reflects the thinking, planning, organizing around every array of political, economic and social life that represents the contemporary Muslim Brotherhood. However, a holistic vision does not mean a homogeneous entity. The Muslim Brotherhood, being a large and complex movement, is one that encompasses a number of ideological standpoints, along the spectrum of a reformist agenda on one end of the spectrum (for example in the person of Essam el Erian) to a Salafi agenda on the other (Mohamed el Khateeb, the former Mufti of the movement). It is also one of a number of struggles, first between the Old Guard, who represent the rule of the gerontocracy and the younger generations who have been on the fringes of the decision-making apparatus within the movement. While the Muslim Brotherhood has at its inception had strong links with the Wahabi-Salafi ideology[[4]](#footnote-4), there has also been a steady process of the Salafization[[5]](#footnote-5) of the Brotherhood occurring over the past fifty years, and which has been accentuated by the migration to Gulf countries (Tammam 2010, Abdel-Latif 2008).

The Muslim Brotherhood highly sophisticated institutional pyramidal structure has survived and evolved over more than 80 years, with clear lines of command and division of labour. At the top of the pyramid is the Supreme Guide, the leader, and under him the Guidance Bureau, “the power house of the movement”. The Shura Council elect members of the Guidance Bureau. Organizationally, the country is divided into administrative offices which plan and implement the work of the Brothers[[6]](#footnote-6).

The Muslim Brothers is also a highly dynamic movement that has affiliate movements worldwide, extending from Gaza to Jordan to Pakistan to Turkey to Indonesia. Its international base is in the UK. When examining the positioning of the Muslim Sisters in the Muslim Brotherhood, it would be highly limiting to adopt an institutional approach that does not examine the broader political, economic and social context in which the movement engages.

Second, it is important to be transparent about positionality and standpoint. In view of the researcher being a non-Islamist Egyptian, I recognize that I do not have “insider” status and cannot for example be accepted as a participant-observer by the movement. In order to address this limitation, I have sought to rely on first-hand accounts, narratives and autobiographies as much as possible, in order to avoid the objectification of the movement. On standpoint, as a feminist, I have consciously avoided an “appraisal approach” towards the Muslim Sisters, guided by a “checklist” on where they stand on different issues. Nonetheless, power relations are central to my understanding of feminism and have been central to this inquiry. I have sought to understand shifts and changes in gender hierarchies, and whether ideology is seeking to expand or circumscribe agency and choice for women, but also in relation to conceptions of masculinities and femininities.

The empirical research sought to capture the multivocality of the Muslim Brotherhood through interviews with a wide array of individuals across age, gender, ideological orientation, position within the movement/party. Two interviews were also held with members who have defected from the Brothers post-2011. A number of interviews were conducted in 2006 and more interviews were undertaken in 2012[[7]](#footnote-7), the latter being an exceptionally opportune moment to interview Muslim Brothers and Sisters because they were at the historic apex of their power. Where deemed appropriate, the interviews have been anonymised to protect their identities.

The interviews were complemented with an analysis of autobiographies of Muslim Sisters, of a historical as well as contemporary nature, of loyalists as well as defectors. These autobiographies were critically important because the narratives revealed a great deal about the power dynamics within the movement. The autobiography of Zeinab el Ghazali the spiritual Godmother of the Muslim Sisters is perhaps the most renowned, however other autobiographies consulted include that of Fatma Abd el Hady, a teacher who joined the Brothers in 1942, draw by their piety and uprightness and who became one of the 12 committee members that revived Muslim Sisters division in the 1940s. It also draws on autobiographies of defectors such as Intesar Abdel Moneim’s account (2011).

As the Muslim Brotherhood are prolific in their writings, the research drew on scholarship written by members themselves[[8]](#footnote-8). Much credit is due to Gomaa Amin, a long standing member of the Guidance Bureau and the Muslim Brother’s historian par excellence who compiled the writings of Hassan el Banna and the Brothers from the time of their inception to present day. The Ikhwanweb was particularly useful for presenting the official position on unfolding events and issues. This was complemented with primary and secondary literature review.

**The Sisters of the Muslim Brotherhood: what shapes agency?**

There is a rich a body of scholarship on the agency, mobilization and conceptions of the self, society and the political order among women and men who belong to Islamist movements in Egypt (Fernea 1985, Cooke 2001, Karam 1998, 2002, Mahmoud 2012, El Mahdi 2010 among many others). Much of the discussion has been on the idea that they represent indigenous forms of agency, mobilization and pioneers in advancing a different kind of feminism (Osman 2003, Maumoon 2007, Fernea, Karam 1997, Abdel Latif, Abdel Latif and Ottaway).

This paper focuses on one aspect of the discussion of the agency of the Muslim Sisterhood which is in relation to the interface between the Muslim Brothers and regime type. The main argument advanced by Abdel Latif (2008) is that women in the Muslim Brotherhood is that their ability to reform from within and exercise their fully agency has been inhibited, or sidelined by the contingencies of the struggle against the security state and the latter’s deployment of the most repressive tactics against the movement. While recognizing that there are many factors that stifle the empowerment of women in the Muslim Brothers, Abdel Latif (2008) cites authoritarianism as the greatest deterrent. Writing in 2008, Abdel Latif argues that "a more democratic political environment, no doubt, boost the fortunes of Brothers who favour women's activism. But as long as repressive policies continue against the movement, the balance will tilt in favour of the more conservative elements, who want to restrict women's activism and role because of the risk of a security crackdown" (Abdel Latif 2008: 12). Abdel Latif’s argument is premised on the justifications that the Muslim Brotherhood leadership consistently provided in defense of its position not to have women in high decision-making positions, namely, protecting them from the ruthlessness of the regime. Abdel Latif’s hypothesis (2008) is that once the shackles of authoritarian rule are removed, the Muslim Sisters will have the freedom to demand their rights, and press for full inclusion in the hierarchy of the movement, giving hardliners little excuse to contest their claims. While Egypt did not become a democratic regime in 2011, the security apparatus of the Mubarak regime was brought down (at least temporarily) and Islamist movements were able to enjoy full unrestricted freedom to engage in politics. With this reconfigured political order post-2011, it became possible to explore first, whether the Muslim Sisters challenged their position within the Muslim Brotherhood and second whether there was any link between internal reconfiguration and the external policy level.

In perhaps the most radical rejection of the liberal humanist tradition undermining the discussion of identity, gender and resistance is Saba Mahmoud’s plea that we examine women’s agency in the mosque movements of Egypt through the alternative lens of their own conceptions and practices of piety and ethics. In *Politics of Piety*, Mahmoud narratives her ethnographic experience as a participant observer between 1995-1997 in “the mosque movement” in Cairo. Mahmoud (2012) obscures the relationship between women exercising their agency through frequenting mosques for learning and the Islamist movements. On the one hand, she traces the emergence of the mosque movement to some key figures associated with the Muslim Brotherhood. Key among them is Hassan el Banna who harnessed the power of da`wa [prosletization, call to God] through mosques to counter the in his view the unsatisfactory religious education extended formally by the `ulama. On the emergence of women’s agency as da`eyat in mosques, Mahmoud traces the emergence of this phenomenon as well as the growth of women’s participation in all-women learning circles in the mosque to the spiritual godmother of the Muslim Brotherhood, Zeinab el Ghazali. On the other hand, Mahmoud notes that “only a very few of the mosque groups are affiliated with the Muslim Brothers” (2012: 71). Even for a seasoned ethnographer, it would have been very difficult to decipher the percentage of mosques who are Muslim Brotherhood affiliated because the movement and its members would have done every effort to conceal their identity on account of their vulnerability to constant security apparatus’ harassment. Hence the extent to which da`eyat or their followers have Muslim Brotherhood sympathies (along the different tiers identified above) would be very difficult to determine in a few Cairene mosques, let along across the country.

Central to Mahmoud’s thesis is the idea that while all forms of agency are political, including that of the piety movement, yet, their exercise of politics is not in the realm of the conventional or formal or that “based on state-centric conceptions of social change” (Mahmoud 2012: xv) The extent to which the piety movement continued to be exclusively focused on the practice of faith and the fault lines between movements that are explicitly “nationalist-identitarian” and those that are engaged in da`wa and piety are explored in the latter part of the paper.

**The historical trajectory of the Muslim Sisters**

The history of the organizational positioning of the Muslim Sisters within the Muslim Brotherhood hierarchy is central to understanding the structural constraints to the emergence of an autonomous Muslim Sisterhood movement. Women members of the Muslim Brotherhood were organizationally envisaged to serve as the helping hand of the Brotherhood and never as a parallel women-led movement. Shortly following Hassan el Banna, founded the Muslim Brotherhood in Ismailiya in 1928, he established a club, a mosque, a school for boys followed in 1932 by a school for girls named "*Umahat al Mo'meneen*" (the mothers of believers). The school was designated with teaching the wives, daughters and relatives of the Muslim Brotherhood members, combining Islamic teaching with subjects that are seen to be pertinent to women's domestic role (Khayal and El Gohary 1993:231-232). The female staff entrusted with teaching the students were given the title of "the Muslim Sisters group“ [ferqah] (ibid. 1993: 232). Hassan el Banna envisioned a role for the Muslim Sisters that would extend beyond the classroom and encompass da‘wa among women in the households of Muslim Brotherhood members and society more widely. Makarem el Deiry notes that he first began to give six women weekly lessons then identified 120 female university graduates and highly cultured women to provide them with a year’s training on doctrinal and daily life matters (El Deiry 325-326).

Hassan el Banna drew internal by-laws for the organizational structure of the group in which he established modes of communication between the leader of the Sisters Division and the Brotherhood leadership to be through a trusted male Muslim Brother. According to Gom‘a Amin, the Muslim Sisters reached the apex of their activism in Cairo between 1943-1945. During the 1940s, the Muslim Sisters were engaged in religious education, da‘wa, charity, and fund-raising and were encouraged to establish their own women’s non-profit associations. While the curriculum for members of the Muslim Brothers offered intense training in Islamic doctrine as well as political apprenticeship, the curriculum of the Muslim Sisters was heavily informed by the gender roles that the movement wished them to play as mothers and wives, and in public, religious outreach with women.

As the activities of the Sisters grew, an (all-male) implementing committee was formed in 1944 to regulate the work and included a small number of women assuming leadership roles. We only have one version of what led Hassan el Banna to decide to prohibit women’leadership in the cadre of the Muslim Brotherhood, that of Gom‘a Amin. He said there was a leadership dispute between a number of women which led to not only the removal of all women from leadership positions but the containment of the Muslim Sisters’ position within the organization structure.

Unlike other parts of the Muslim Brotherhood, like the student tanzeem for example, the new Muslim Sisters division had no positions, committees, taskforces, or any other organizational mechanism for delegating responsibilities and authorities. This heavy centralization, containment and prohibition of women’s leadership is what led Zeinab el Ghazali, according to one leading Muslim Sister, Fatma Abd el Hady, to reject leading the Muslim Sisters when offered the position by Hassan el Banna. El Banna refused to delineate a role and place for the Muslim Sisters as equal and equivalent to the Muslim Brothers and empathetically insisted that the Muslim Sisters are part of the Muslim Brothers (Abd el Hady 2011: 23, Cooke 2001: 88).

It is only many years later in 1948 that El Ghazali declared her allegiance to El Banna and in 1965, Zeinab el Ghazali formally joined the Muslim Brothers. Yet even then, she did not bring her own women’s organization under the fold of the Muslim Brothers. Rather her activism was part of the special division led by Sayed Qutb’s to engage in armed resistance against the Nasserite regime. She was tried by the Nasserite regime for being a member of the special unit accused of planning to overthrow the regime and was subjected to the most inhumane forms of torture while imprisoned (Al-Ghazali 1999). She was to re-emerge later as the spiritual mentor of the Muslim Sisters in the 1970s and is venerated as a role model among the Muslim Sisters to this day.

In the absence of a tanzeem for women, the Muslim Sisters have been governed (with the exception of the first few years) by male leadership, have more limited opportunity for leadership training in comparison to men, and no voting power over the members wo represent the movement (not to mention they cannot be leaders themselves).

In terms of initiation into the movement, there are parallel pathways which are deeply gendered. Girls join *al zahrawat* (roses) while boys join *al ashbal* (cubs). While girls are equipped for their roles as future mothers and wives and for outreach among women, boys are equipped for leadership though the training received changed dramatically after 2011 (see below). If a person wants to join the Muslim Brotherhood as an adult, they have to go through a number of phases. First there is the “*mohebeen*”, those who believe or are sympathetic to the movement’s message but are not organizationally affiliated. Then there are al moua’yed, the supporters, whom the movement draws on for action, then al moltazem, those who have a deeper commitment to the cause, then the worker `amel who consistently strives to strengthen the movement and the moujahed – s/he who strives in jihad, i.e. is prepared to suffer for the movement. Internally those that achieve the status of *moujahed* have more weight than those on lower tiers and hence, women’s acquisition of that status is extraordinarily important.

In 1948, the Muslim Brotherhood was dissolved, and so was the Muslim Sisters as part of it. The next two decades saw an intense crackdown from President Nasser on the Muslim Brotherhood, with members of the movement being imprisoned and tortured (some of them Muslim Sisters), going underground, or fleeing overseas. The Sisters played a central role to the survival of the movement and the coping strategies of individuals and families. The Sisterhood rose to the task of distributing food to the malnourished Brothers in prison as well as being the lines of communication through which important messages and information was relayed. They collected money and distributed it to the female headed households of the Brothers who were in prison or who had fled to Saudi Arabia and other countries.

Political liberalization under Sadat and Mubarak and the promotion of welfare pluralism in lieu of Nasser’s state welfarism opened the door for the Muslim Brothers to activate their role in society. The Muslim Sisters became particularly active through the mosque movements, university campus outreach and non-profit welfare associations, a trend that continued up to the demise of the Mubarak regime. .

***Post-Mubarak political ascendency of the Brothers: selective spaces of the Muslim Sisters’ political empowerment***

When a number of youth movements and some political parties called upon the Egyptian people to join the protests that were planned for January 25th, 2011, the Muslim Brotherhood Supreme Guidance bureau had decided against joining the political forces in calling upon its members to join. Yet as with some young male members of the movement, young female members joined independently. One young woman recalls that she decided to join the protests and she was warned by a senior Muslim Sister that there was no takleef [order] from the Guidance Bureau and she went down anyway. This is the day that she identifies as the beginning of the end of her relationship with the Brothers. Most of the Muslim Sisters joined the rest of the movement in the public squares from the 28th January 2011 when there was a formal delegation from the Supreme Guidance Bureau of the Muslim Brotherhood to participate. In interviews, female and male members of the Muslim Brothers said that in addition to participating as Egyptian women in the uprising, the Muslim Sisters played two critical roles: first, as part of the medical team that attended to the injured and assaulted, and second, preparing and distributing food to the masses camped in Tahrir Square. Some of the Muslim Sisters had participated in a number of other protests such as against the war on Iraq or in defense of the Palestinians, but for many Muslim Sisters interviewed, the revolution was when women’s voices were amplified.

Shortly after the Egyptian revolution on the 29th-30th April 2011, the Muslim Brotherhood held its first Shura Council meeting openly. It was a golden opportunity to elect women members to the Shura Council, in view of the fact that there were no longer security harassments, however, this did not materialize. Some of the female members of the Muslim Brotherhood began to openly call for leadership positions within the movement. At a MB youth meeting in April 2011 attended by around 1,500 youth the issues around the movement’s organizational structures were raised, including the necessity of establishing an organizational structure – a tanzeem- for the Sisters of the Brotherhood. Shortly after, on the 2nd of July, 2011, a conference specifically under the theme “Women from the revolution to renaissance”. This high level conference was attended by the Supreme Guide, Bad`ie, Khayrat al Shatter, the deputy Guide, members of the Guidance Bureau, key actors and some 2,500 sisters. Bad‘ie praised the role played by women in the revolution as activists, mothers, sisters and wives of the protestors and started by paying tribute to the mothers of martyrs. The recommendations spoke of enhancing women’s political representation in syndicates, political parties and activism through NGOs, and raising women’s awareness of the conspiracies aimed at undermining the family (presumably international actors plus local feminist organizations). One key concession, recounted by an interviewee, was that pressed to show that they are including women in the movement, they allowed the Muslim Sisters for the first time ever to assume leadership positions in the administrative units across the country, first in 6th October City, Alexandria and Fayoum (interviews, 2012).

With the promulgation of a new electoral law in 2011, for the first time in its history, the Muslim Brotherhood was allowed to establish its own political party and therefore become a legitimate political contender on the Egyptian scene. The establishment of the Freedom and Justice party created many opportunities for women in the Muslim Brotherhood to become politically involved, as founders, leaders and as members on several committees.

The political agency of women of Islamist affiliation flourished. They had extensive and expansive skills in outreach and constituency building established through years of welfare provision through charitable organisations and through building bridges with women in universities and educational institutes as well as religious education in mosques (Wickham 2003).

A number of interviewees with current and defected members of the Muslim Brotherhood cited the mosque as a central site for the mobilization of the masses. One Muslim Sister said it was unfortunate that they had to resort to slogans which press people to vote for the FJP (or yes in the constitutional referendum of 2011, see Hamzawy 2013) if they wished to defend Islam, but faced with El Nour Salafi party, they felt there was no other option if they were to secure voters’ support. It is interesting that E. who defected from the Muslim Brotherhood said that for voters and expanded outreach, the mohebeen are the most important tier because their numbers are so large. A lot of the mohebeen were from the mosque movements. The intention here is not necessarily to suggest that the piety movement members concealed their political affinities (although for some that cannot be negated as a possibility. Rather it is to suggest that women mosque frequenters’ vision of Islamic ethics and piety may have found the Muslim Brotherhood’s message of engaging in direct political action to defend Islam appealing. This is particularly so if these messages are being conveyed by respected Muslim Sisters that have been active in the mosques for several decades. In short, the politicization of the mosque space through the mobilization of Muslim Brotherhood supporters questions the notion that piety movements engage in a different kind of politics (Mahmoud 2012). Flexible politicization is possible under particular contextual dynamics and this perhaps requires a revisiting of the notion that mosque movements exclusively engage in a kind of politics around ethics and piety.

Between February 2011 to June 2013, Egypt witnessed two constitutional referendums (March 2011 and December 2012), a parliamentary and a presidential election (December 2011 and June 2012 respectively). It is no exaggeration to say that the mobilization of women and families by the Muslim Sisters was central to the successive victories that the Muslim Brotherhood enjoyed in these elections. As one interviewee noted, every woman played a role in the outreach: Housewives would go down to the markets, the public transport, their neighbours spreading the word about our party, girls as young as 15 who would go down to the shops and speak to the people, discuss their electoral platform and win them om their side. Women would move from one electoral district to another participating in the events that were being held for public engagement, sometimes leaving home early in the morning and returning by midnight.

While the Freedom and Justice party fielded 79 candidates in the 2011/2012 parliamentary elections, the majority were not at the head of the proportional lists and therefore only four Muslim Sisters made it to parliament. The overall percentage of women in Egypt’s first post-Mubarak parliament (with a majority Islamist representation) was at 2.2% shamefully low.

Once President Morsi won the presidential elections in June 2012, a handful of prominent older women belonging to the movement as well as sympathisers were given some positions in the constituent assembly delegated with writing the constitution, as well as in advisory positions to the President.

It is also important to note that the exigencies of the political moment , one where the Muslim Brotherhood needed the full participation and mobilization of its female members in order to encourage people to vote for them meant that the doctrine of prioritizing domesticity over public roles was not one that interviewees felt was strongly communicated during that period. In fact this was a time in which the Muslim Sisters were travelling frequently, campaigning out of the house until late with relaxed curfew and rules on gender mixing. It is of no surprise that in many interviewes with women members of the Muslim Brotherhood they cited women’s political freedom to exercise their agency, uninhibited by the security apparatus as the most important change in women’s lives post-Mubarak.

The highly organized, co-ordinated and motivated manner of working of the FJP was in striking contrast to many of the other parties who were still struggling to build a base, identify effective outreach methods and ways of framing. However, the heavy focus on obedience and compliance underpinning the foundational values of the Muslim Brotherhood did not go down well with the members of the movement who had been involved as part of the revolutionary movement. Their struggle was not only against Mubarak but against the top down line of commands that they have been used to receiving as young people living in a gerontocracy.

**Conclusion: Revisiting the regime-movement-gender hierarchy debate within Islamist movements**

Reflecting on Abdel Latif’s hypothesis that once the shackles of authoritarianism, the Muslim Sisters would thrive, the exercise of political agency in public space in particular through the Freedom and Justice party and civil society was unparalleled. However, this did not transform into opportunities for leadership within the Muslim Brotherhood. This was not through lack of claims-making on the part of activist women. From the interviews it became clear some of the Muslim Sisters did press for their own organizational entity, voting rights and representation in the central decision-making structures such as the Shura Council and Guidance Bureau.

For women and men who pressed for reforms , there were two options, akin to what Albert Hirschman described in his seminal work “Exit, voice and Loyalty” (1970) whereby faced with conflict within one’s organization, one has two options, either to exit or to voice, i.e. articulate the grievance and seek to remedy it. When one operates in a closed organization and there is a strong sense of loyalty, the inclination is to voice grievances rather than exit. As there was limited room for manoeuvring, some exited or were expelled from the Muslim Brotherhood. E. left on the 16th November, 2016 and one of the contributing factors (though not the only one) was her frustration at the inertia in recognizing the Muslim Sisters. She and another [male] defector said they were outraged that while in Gaza (a context under occupation and deeply patriarchal), Hamas had established an automous kayan “entity” for women, the Muslim Brothers in Egypt still did not have their own structure.

Since 2013, the Muslim Sisters have played a leading role in raising awareness internationally of the predicament of the Muslim Brotherhood, and internally, have engaged in extensive advocacy and resistance. Just as they did during the wave of repression in the 1950s-1960s under Nasser, the Muslim Sisters have risen to the task of providing care and support for the families whose members are imprisoned, gone into exile or suffering. It remains to be seen whether the significance of the agency of the Muslim Sisters under these difficult political conditions will put pressure in the long run on the Guidance Bureau to reconsider its gender policies. Perhaps the weakening of the Guidance Bureau as well as political pragmatism for survival will strengthen the reformists within, certainly the contrary, the political empowerment of the movement in 2011-2013 had run contrary to that.

However, the Muslim Brotherhood as a movement remained immune to any tinkering with its system. This was not on account of the absence of claims-making by the Muslim Sisters, many campaigned and pressed for the creation of a tanzeem, for voting rights and for positions in the Shura council and Guidance Bureau. The resistance to reforming the structure was on account of the increased empowerment of the Old Guard, not as predicted by Abdel Latif (2008), their containment when political repression relaxed. As the movement sought to remain intact, those Sisters that could not conform had no choice but to exit.

Despite the Muslim Broterhood’s major contribution to religious thought through prolific scholarship, it has retained among some of its leaders and rank and file an affiliation to Salafi thought. This has inhibited the prospects of the emergence of a cohort of Muslim Sisters who are an authoritative source of religious teaching for the Brothers. Women can play a role prosletizing to other women, but ultimately matters of religious teaching are kept to men’s leadership. Moreover, from the interviews and accounts undertaken in 2012, it seems that the mosques were key sites for the mobilization of the Muslim Sisters of voters and supporters. This questions the possibility of flexible politicization of the women who frequent the mosques as part of the piety movement. It is perhaps timely to reconsider whether the agential commitment to a kind of politics around ethics and piety is always the case when political opportunity and circumstances alter with regime type.

The current period (2013-2016) is one in which the Muslim Brotherhood, including the Sisters as part of the movement have been subjected to a systematic, extreme and ruthless crackdown. Against this backdrop, the question of whether a women’s tanzeem will be established will be put aside as the survival of the movement is prioritized. If the Old Guard has been weakened by the crackdown, then undoubtedly the younger generations may push in future for greater reform. Factors that may influence the position of the Muslim Sisters organizationally include how their sacrifices (and jihad) translate into recognition within the movement, the authority and composition of the male members of the Guidance Bureau and the ideological predisposition of the voting members of the Muslim Brotherhood. If the latter come from the rank and file who have been Salafized, this will not bid well for the women. On the other hand, for women who have assumed political leadership positions within the party, this may, with time translate into pressure for internal reform of the movement. This however, is not to be interpreted synonymously as an advancement of a gender equality agenda on a policy level, a matter that is the subject of another paper.

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1. In this paper, *Islamic* refers to what draws on Islam the religion, while *Islamist* is specifically used to describe those who support a political movement, force or party that aspires to power with a view of the instatement of a system of governance drawing on Shariah, while the term *Muslim* is referred to any person who follows Islam the faith irrespective of whether they support an Islamist party or not [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The word Salafi here is refers to Salafi political thought premised on the political thought of Ibn Hanbal who formed one of the four schools in Islamic jurisprudence and the highly conservative Imam Ibn Taymeya, both are considered main sources of Salafi thinking. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. A people, nation, or race. The word occurs approximately forty times in the Quran. Ummah is a term for a group of people associated with certain ties such as language, history, sex, and/or religion. The nation is considered a larger entity than the state. In Arabic and Islamic culture, the nation is a gathering of people with one religion (Islam) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Wahabi ideology emanates from the political thought of Mohammed Abd Ibn el Wahab (1703-1791) in Saudi Arabia to revive the tradition of returning to the fundamentals of Islam. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The Salafis believe in Al Salaf al Saleh, which refers to the righteous path being that lived and prescribed by the Prophet and his companions only in the first century of Muslim society (Abasi 2002, Bakr 2011, Othman 1981). Salafis reject all forms of ijetehad (revisionist interpretation of the text). An authoritative source on Salafism, Dr Mustapha Helmy defines Salafism as underpinned by three foundations. The first is to follow Al Salaf el Salah (the Prophet and his companions). The second is to reject modern tafsir (interpretation). The third is to follow the ways of thinking mentioned in the Koran and reject philosophic, logic and other ways of thinking Helmy (1976: 35-46) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For a most authoritative description of the Muslim Brotherhood’s organizational hierarchy, see Mitchell (1969) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The interviews of 2006 were undertaken by the author [details to be added after peer review to protect anonymity] while interviews undertaken in 2012 were done by Egyptian journalist Robeir el Fares. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Also see Muslim Brotherhood, 2005, 2006, undated for position statements on their vision of the status and role of women and gender organization of social and politics [↑](#footnote-ref-8)