

# The American role in the Muslim Brotherhood rise to power

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**ABSTRACT:** This study explores the hypothesis that Muslim Brotherhood group's ascension to power in Egypt was facilitated by American policies. It urges that these policies converge with the interests of the group, in a clear coup against American allies who, over decades, had failed to accomplish the objectives set by the United States in the region.

**KEY WORDS:** Muslim Brotherhood. Egypt. Arab Spring. USA.



## O papel americano na ascensão da Irmandade Muçulmana ao poder

**RESUMO:** Este estudo explora a hipótese de que a ascensão do grupo Irmandade Muçulmana ao poder no Egito foi facilitada pelas políticas americanas. Afirma que essas políticas convergiam com os interesses do grupo, em um claro golpe contra os aliados americanos que, ao longo de décadas, falharam em alcançar os objetivos estabelecidos pelos Estados Unidos na região.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Irmandade Muçulmana. Egito. Primavera Árabe. EUA.

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## 1. Introduction

The beginning of 2011 witnessed rapid and transformative changes in several countries in the Middle East, driven by a multitude of factors including economic, political, cultural, and social elements. These factors culminated in what became known as the Arab Spring, where demands for freedom, dignity, democracy, and social justice reverberated across the region, largely facilitated by the role of satellite channels and social media platforms. The protests gained momentum as unemployed youth, deprived of opportunities, joined the demonstrations.

While this research acknowledges the controversy surrounding the origins of the Arab Spring, particularly the speculation that it was orchestrated by the United States since 2008, the focus of this study is not on delving into that debate. Instead, it centers on examining the American role, both direct and indirect, in the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood to power in Egypt. The study explores the connections established between the US administration and the leadership of the group, which began in 2006 and continued under President Barack Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

Initially, the Muslim Brotherhood did not actively participate in the early protests, citing concerns of persecution and arrest by the regime. Instead, youth groups like the Youth of Tahrir Square took the lead on Fridays. However, after the fall of Zinedine Bin Ali in Tunisia, the Muslim Brotherhood seized the opportunity and became deeply involved, eventually gaining control over the Egyptian parliament and presidency, with Muhammad Morsi, their candidate, assuming power.

The United States' approach to the Middle East is closely tied to its strategic interests, particularly regarding national security and the preservation of Israel's presence and supremacy in the region. In pursuit of these interests, the US may overlook democratic principles and human rights violations committed by regimes that align with American policies. In the case of Egypt, the US abandoned its longstanding ally, Hosni Mubarak, in order to secure its primary and secondary interests in the region, recognizing that the Muslim Brotherhood could help advance those objectives.

Hosni Mubarak, seen as a stabilizing force and a bulwark against extremist Islamists, along with other Arab leaders, supported the United States in the fight against al-Qaeda and countering Iran. They positioned themselves as champions of stability, presenting an alternative to the rise of extremists and the ensuing chaos. Nevertheless, despite three decades of peace agreements between Egypt and Israel, Mubarak failed to foster acceptance of the State of Israel among the Egyptian people, which ultimately undermined one of the key American interests in the region.

The strategic American interests in the Middle East encompass safeguarding Israel's security and military superiority, combating terrorism, protecting oil sources in the region, and ensuring the continued flow of oil to the West at reasonable prices. Secondary interests include promoting democracy, expanding market access for US goods and services (particularly weapons), and supporting Arab regimes loyal to the US.

Based on these interests, this research puts forth a hypothesis suggesting that the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood to power was a deliberate American policy. It argues that this policy aligned with the group's aspirations for power and was executed as a clear coup against the United States' traditional allies who, for decades, failed to achieve the American goals set for the region.

To substantiate this hypothesis, the study adopts an analytical historical approach, analyzing the determinants of American policy in the Middle East in conjunction with the acceptance of the Muslim Brotherhood. It aims to demonstrate that the American policy aimed to change the ruling regime in Egypt and welcomed the group's accession to power, driven by the American interests that Mubarak's regime was unable to accomplish, including the Egyptian people's rejection of the State of Israel as a normalized presence in the Middle East.

## **2. The change of american policy in the middle east towards political islam**

The influential centers in US decision-making played an important role in changing the US policy towards political Islam,

especially towards the Muslim Brotherhood group. With the goal of containing the projected future influence of political Islam, those centers recommended the US Administration open a relationship with the moderate part of political Islam.

The National Intelligence Council NIC report, released in 2004, entitled "Mapping the Global Future: Report of the National Intelligence Council's 2020 Project," outlined what the world would look like in 2020, especially the Middle East. Regarding the Middle East, the report focused on two aspects: political Islam and the fight against terrorism.

With regard to political Islam, the report believes that political Islam will have a significant global impact leading to 2020, which will rally disparate ethnic and national groups, and perhaps even create an authority that transcends national borders. There are a set of factors that maintain that political Islam remains a major force in the Middle East. These factors include the rising amount of active youth in many Arab countries, weak economic prospects, the influence of religious education, and the Islamization of institutions such as labor unions, NGOs, and political parties (HUTCHINGS, 2004, p. 13).

As for fighting terrorism, the report believes that one of the aspects of the counterterrorism strategy is to develop more open systems and represent more open politicians, provide wider economic opportunities, and to empower Muslim reformers to govern, all while maintaining the greatest opportunity to contain - and ultimately reduce - the terrorist threat (HUTCHINGS, 2004, p. 113).

On the other hand, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace Foundation has defined Islamic groups, or political Islam, into two groups. The first category is of Radical Islamic groups (terrorist groups); The Foundation believes that radical groups do not have the ability to change the features of the Arab world or Islamic societies. The peoples of the region will not accept the ideas of these extremist groups, and therefore they cannot be contained.

Moderate Islamic movements (reformists): The Foundation believes that these movements are the closest to change, especially since they have rejected violence as tools to implement their ideas on the ground, and they will influence the political developments

in the Middle East in the future. Carnegie also described them as the groups that abandoned or officially renounced violence and worked to achieve their goals through peaceful political activities. The Muslim Brotherhood group came within this category (BROWN; HAMZAWY; OUTAWAY; 2006, p. 5).

The meeting, which was held in Rome in 2005 with the participation of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Washington, and the Institute for International Affairs in Rome, in partnership with the German Herbert Quandt Stiftung, the German Marshall Fund in the United States of America, and the Italian Arab Chamber of Commerce, concluded that the democratic transformation in the Middle East has become urgent and necessary, and that the active forces in the Middle East to change the political stage are the moderate Islamic movements (BROWN; HAMZAWY; OUTAWAY; 2006, p. 16).

This concluded that the possibility of promoting democratic transformation in the Arab world is linked to the Islamic movements that have the strongest influence, and their participation in political life is the only option available to achieve any democratic transformation in the Arab world (BROWN; HAMZAWY; OUTAWAY; 2006, p. 18).

A WikiLeaks (ID 1711, 2001) document that was issued on June 21, 2001 by the US embassy in Cairo, revealed the US policy's acceptance of the Muslim Brotherhood group. The document refers to the US embassy's assertion that the group is not inclined to use violence to gain power, and that they represent the only political opposition force. They have the ability to withstand despite the oppression they are subjected to by the Egyptian security forces. The document also states that although the Muslim Brotherhood group has the opportunity to be present in the political arena, they do not pose a serious threat to the Egyptian government, though they are subject to harassment by the Egyptian state security forces. Most of their members prefer to gain change through elections and political activity, not by violence. The document believes that the group was not able to seize power at that time, but that they represent the only force of the political opposition that could survive and withstand in light of the continuous absence of the secular political opposition.

From this standpoint, in 2007, the US State Department with the support of American intelligence, adopted a policy that allows its diplomats to communicate and negotiate with leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood group, not only in Egypt, Syria and Iraq, but in other Arab countries and abroad as well. US officials said that the program of communication and dialogue, which the US State Department kept away from the media, is limited in principle to members of the Muslim Brotherhood group who are elected to legislative institutions and municipal councils in Arab countries, in addition to Guidance (Morshid), observers and their assistants. An American official stated that Washington believes that with the policy of communication and dialogue with the group, he may encourage the crystallization of a pro-Western trend inside Hamas (DABAH, 2007).

Likewise, the German expert on Islamic movements, Lotus Rogler (2011), believes that the spring of the Arab revolutions affected the West by changing the West's stance on Islamic movements and starting communication and dialogue with them. He believes that there are two main factors, the first of which is a new political reality in Egypt and the Arab region. This new political scene prompted the United States to fully recognize a major political player, which is the Muslim Brotherhood group and other Islamic movements. The second factor is the affirmation of respect for the principles of democracy. The Muslim Brotherhood group in Egypt and other Islamist movements in Tunisia and Morocco have not resorted to violence for several years.

### **3. Contact between the muslim brotherhood and the USA**

The US administration's contact with the Muslim Brotherhood group in Egypt preceded the outbreak of the Arab Spring revolutions in the region, but had been limited to the elected parliament members, and re-expanded during the Arab Spring revolutions. During the Egyptian revolution for example, the US administration adopted a new strategy, which was to cooperate with all the active players on the Egyptian scene, including the Muslim Brotherhood group. The American administration believed that if the Muslim Brotherhood group did not comply, it could pressure the group to

do so by utilizing Washington's economic power as a major tool, whether by offering American aid to the Egyptian army, or by using Washington's influence in international financial institutions that the group would need to adjust the economic situation.

In her statement on June 24, 2011, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said in Budapest that the United States would resume limited contact with the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. Clinton emphasized that it was in Washington's best interest to deal with parties committed to nonviolent political activities (THE MUSLIM, 2011).

This statement was followed by a publicized meeting of the US State Department spokesperson with the press saying that Hillary Clinton spoke in the Hungarian capital about the Obama administration's continued limited contacts with the group, contacts that began intermittently since approximately 2006. The spokesman said that officials at the American embassy in Cairo and Washington are allowed to communicate with members of the Muslim Brotherhood group, and that, as Clinton said, those contacts come within the American national interest, as the United States wants to reach a clear picture of the political situation in Egypt (IBRAHIM, 2011).

In John Kerry's visit to Egypt on the 10<sup>th</sup> of December 2011, he was keen to meet the Egyptian activists of the revolution, including representatives of the Freedom and Justice Party, the political wing of the Muslim Brotherhood, which bore clear signals of support for democracy, elections, and peoples' desires. Kerry focused in his meetings on peace between Egypt and Israel, saying that the road to peace began in Egypt and will remain in Egypt, stressing the importance of preserving the peace treaty with Israel. In addition, Kerry stressed that the American administration wants to deal with any government the Egyptian people choose, even if the United States is not satisfied with everything that this government does (GABRIEL, Undated, p. 11-12).

Days after Kerry's visit, US Ambassador to Cairo Ann Patterson announced that the United States looks forward to working with any party that will be elected by the Egyptian people and with a democratic government (GABRIEL, Undated, p. 12).

In April 2012, the White House hosted a delegation of Muslim Brotherhood representatives, just a few months after the meetings of senior US representatives (among them William Burns, responsible for relations with the Brotherhood) in Cairo. As a result of this meeting, US officials submitted a positive report to their government about Muslim Brotherhood (ALNAQABI, 2020).

#### **4. Results of us contacts with the muslim brotherhood**

The US administration defended its position on supporting the Muslim Brotherhood before the US Congress through James Clapper, who assured the Congressional Intelligence Committee in a hearing on October 2, 2011, that the Muslim Brotherhood is a moderate and largely secular organization. It avoided violence, has no expansionary goal, at least internationally. He responded to a question by Representative Sue Mike, by saying that the group in Egypt is not an extremist group and sought social ends to improve the political system in Egypt (PLAN, 2019).

The US administration also refused to deal with the Egyptian government's accusations that the group is a terrorist, as WikiLeaks documents issued by the US embassy in Cairo revealed the Egyptians' attempts to dissuade the US administration from conducting any dialogue with the Muslim Brotherhood. The documents show the US administration's refusal to listen to the Egyptian government, whose representatives said in the second U.S.-Egypt Counterterrorism Joint Working Group on February 26<sup>th</sup>, 2006, that the Muslim Brotherhood is a terrorist group, but the US administration saw that these accusations were nothing more than a political rivalry.

One of these documents, dated March 19<sup>th</sup>, 2006, indicated that Major General Ibrahim Hammad, from the Investigation Service of the State Security Agency, had said in the meeting that the Muslim Brotherhood was one of the terrorist groups from the Islamic Jihad Movement that was responsible for assassinating President Sadat, and that the Islamic group was responsible for the Luxor massacre of 1997, and that Sheikh Omar Abdel Rahman, who was convicted in the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, was a member of

the Muslim Brotherhood. At the end of his speech, Hammad was surprised that Western countries sought to hold a dialogue with the group.

Major General Hammad's proposal represented a clear message to the US government; they should not consider having a dialogue with the Muslim Brotherhood. That is why the embassy believes that the Egyptian government's hostility to the Muslim Brotherhood is based on the idea that it is a political opponent rather than a terrorist organization. The validity of that belief is evidenced by the fact that leading figures in the Egyptian government, in another context, have said that they do not believe that the Muslim Brotherhood is involved in planning or carrying out any terrorist acts (WIKILEAKS, 2006).

On the other hand, the Muslim Brotherhood had sent indirect messages to the USA and Europe, calling for acceptance of the Muslim Brotherhood, as opposed to Islamic extremists, and those seeking democracy and reforming the ruling regimes, in the Middle East by peaceful means.

A WikiLeaks document titled "Muslim Brotherhood MPs Complain: Why we were excluded from the Meeting with David Price?", issued by the US embassy in Cairo on November 7<sup>th</sup>, 2004, discusses how the US embassy considers that there is eagerness among Muslim Brotherhood deputies in the Egyptian People Council to meet with American officials. The embassy sees this as a clear development in the group's attitudes towards meeting members of the US Congress. They had expressed, on their English-speaking website, their strong rejection of not being invited by the President of the Council to participate in a meeting with members of the US Congress. In addition, they stressed that they did not oppose visiting members of the US Congress and communicating with them (WIKILEAKS, 2004).

In return, the Muslim Brotherhood worked to reassure the USA that it was neither against the West nor the United States of America. Their policies are consistent with those of the United States regarding the Middle East, and their interests are not in conflict with those of the United States. They have also sought to market themselves as an alternative to terrorist groups, and that

they support reform and democracy. Most importantly, they accept coexistence with the State of Israel in the region.

In an article by Professor Ibrahim Al-Hudhaibi (2007) on the group's website (Wiki Brothers) dated September 13<sup>th</sup>, 2007 and entitled "Stop the Fight against Moderate Islamists," Al-Hudhaibi sends a message to the West, especially to the USA, that the Muslim Brotherhood does not adopt an anti-Western agenda, that its interest is focused on issues of internal reform, and that it is ready to enter into a dialogue with the West. He affirms that the absence of the role of the Muslim Brotherhood will enable extremists to prove the legitimacy of their ideas and undermine hopes and calls for deep peaceful reform within the ruling regimes of the Middle East.

In regard to the internal level of the group, the international organization of the Muslim Brotherhood held a secret meeting in Istanbul on September 21<sup>st</sup>, 2008 to discuss the situation of the group and the developments taking place in the world in general and in the Islamic world in particular. The meeting discussed the role of the group and the international view of the Muslim Brotherhood. The meeting concluded with the confirmation of two facts, distancing from extremism, and accepting the existence of the State of Israel.

Sending messages of confirmation to the West that the group's ideology is moderate and not extremist, to enhance the West's view of the group, especially since the West recently appeared to regard the group as carrying a moderate ideology, which speeds up the Western acceptance of the Muslim Brotherhood. The presence of this ideology represents a guarantee that problems and unrest will not occur in the region, it will be a stabilizing factor for the region, and thus the West will view it as a moderate and non-terrorist group.

The Muslim Brotherhood worked to adopt the Turkish model as a platform to improve its image in front of the West, and to be accepted by the USA and Europe when the group came to power in those countries. The group's leadership realized that the Turkish model has become acceptable to many countries in Europe and America because Turkey has accepted dealing with Israel without any problems nor objections. It also realizes that the West does not

care about who rules Turkey, it cares about the ability of any party to create stability regardless of its orientation. From this standpoint, they are dealing with the current regime that is controlled by President Erdogan. Consequently, the Muslim Brotherhood will follow Turkey's path, which means acceptance of coexistence, with the presence of the State of Israel in the region (RECORD, 2013).

The opponents of the Muslim Brotherhood accused the group of having a secret agreement with the USA under which the US administration would allow the Muslim Brotherhood to rule in Egypt in exchange for the continuation of the Egyptian-Israeli peace agreements and the Muslim Brotherhood's acceptance of the existence of Israel. Despite the absence of documents confirming the agreement, some indications point to the possibility of unwritten understandings between the group and the US administration.

The official mail of the US Secretary of State, which was revealed by the Trump administration this year, revealed a clear indication of how President Morsi was dealing with the USA and Europe through messages of reassurance that had been sent about the Muslim Brotherhood's view towards the State of Israel.

The changes that occurred began with President Morsi as leader of the Egyptian army, whereby President Morsi removed the politicized military leadership and replaced it with younger generals who have good relations with the United States, Western Europe, and Israel. Morsi took advantage of the April 5<sup>th</sup>, 2012 ambush in which border guards were killed by tribal militants in the Sinai Peninsula to make such changes (MUHAMMAD, August 2012).

During President Morsi's visit to the European Union on September 14<sup>th</sup>, 2012, many European officials expressed their belief that the Morsi government was very open in its stances regarding Islam, Israel, and the non-Islamic world (MUHAMMAD, September 2012).

The most interesting communications that led to a widespread controversy in the Egyptian arena were the messages that were exchanged between President Mohamed Morsi and Shimon Peres, President of the State of Israel, specifically one particular message that's warmth exceeded the protocol and diplomatic aspect

between states and presidents. President Morsi addressed the President of the State of Israel with “my dear and great friend” and “I wish you happiness and well for your country.”

The researcher Munir Adeeb, an expert on extremist Islamic groups, in his comment on these messages, reached the strong conclusion that the Muslim Brotherhood is ready to ally with Satan for the sake of its interests and impose its ideologies. He also stated that the group had previously agreed with Israel to hand over part of Sinai for the resettlement of the Palestinians (ICSS, 2020).

It seems that the revival of the Giora Eiland project, which proposed the establishment of a Palestinian state on a part of the Sinai in addition to the Gaza Strip, was presented to President Muhammad Morsi and approved. But the project was not implemented due to the Muslim Brotherhood’s fear of a negative impact on their position in Power and removing Morsi from presidency in the country after only a short period. The Brotherhood also anticipated the Palestinians’ rejection of any proposed resettlement outside the borders of Palestine, as well as the rejection of any state outside the 1967 borders with East Jerusalem as its capital.

Former Egyptian Minister of Planning and International Cooperation Amr Darraj, and former Minister of Investment Yahya Hamed, both under President Morsi’s government, denied President Abbas’s statements, claiming that the statements of President Mahmoud Abbas are lies and there is absolutely no evidence for their validity (PIC, 2018).

Information leaked about President Morsi’s approval to grant part of the Sinai lands to be added to the Gaza Strip as part of the agreement to establish the Palestinian state in order to solve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, but he continued to deny this. However, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas confirmed on more than one occasion that President Muhammad Morsi offered him this solution, but he rejected it.

In July 2013, the US Congress revealed a document signed by Muhammad Morsi, in the presence of Muhammad Badi, the general guide of the Muslim Brotherhood and businessman Khairat al-Shater, that he had secured \$ 8 billion to leave 40% of the lands of Sinai to the Palestinians, to establish their state and end the conflict with Israel (JABR, 2017).

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas confirmed that President Mohamed Morsi offered him a part of Sinai to settle the Palestinians there and resolve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict after that. Abbas said in a speech to the Palestinian National Council PNC, on April 30<sup>th</sup>, 2018, that he received an offer from President Morsi during his presidency, which lasted almost a year, to obtain a plot of land from Sinai for the Palestinians to live on. Abbas considered this project as “a liquidation project for the Palestinian cause, and I said these words frankly to Morsi.” The Palestinian President emphasized that Hamas had expressed its approval of the “State with Temporary Borders” project (SAKR, 2018).

### **5. The Obama administration and the coup against Morsi Rule**

The US administration opposed the Egyptian army’s coup against President Morsi, and considered it a military coup against democracy, and against a democratically elected president. The Obama administration threatened to cut off a large part of the US military aid, which it provides annually to the Egyptian army that led the coup, a total amount of \$ 1.3 billion.

The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, one of the centers of influence on US foreign policy, discussed the US decision. In its discussions there was misunderstanding of what was happening in Egypt, including the talks of removing a democratically elected president, which ignores basic facts presented by the unprecedented mass protests against the rule of the Muslim Brotherhood and against the Interior policies of President Morsi. In addition, President Morsi lost control of the crisis, refused to negotiate for a political solution, and made the reassertion of his control nearly impossible.

Also, the United States’ threat to cut off military aid reinforced the prevailing belief in the Egyptian streets that the US administration wanted the Muslim Brotherhood to return to power, and the Egyptians considered it more threatening, which reinforced Egyptians’ fears of the return of the Muslim Brotherhood and the loss of US influence in Egypt.

The Institute called on the American administration to accept the new reality in order to stabilize Egypt and to use its influence to encourage the leaders of the Egyptian army to allow for a more comprehensive and democratic policy. The Center also considered that cutting aid endangers the US-Egyptian military relationship, which represents a great strategic value to the United States in the Middle East.

The report concluded that cutting US aid will cost Washington a lot, and it will lose its influence in Egypt and will not achieve any gains for the US geo strategy or the democratic prospects in Egypt (TRAGO, 2013).

Finally, President Obama surrendered to the members of his administration, which was divided into two parties, a party represented by Obama and his advisors, and a party represented by most of his officials, including John Kerry, who succeeded in convincing President Obama that what happened in Egypt was not a coup. This was joined by the consensus of the Saudis, Emiratis, and Israelis, the main allies of the United States in the Middle East, towards hostility with the Muslim Brotherhood. Both the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates exerted great pressure on the Obama administration to support the military coup, while Israel exercised similar pressure due to its fear of threats on the borders and Egypt's support for Hamas under President Morsi.

## **6. Conclusion**

The Muslim Brotherhood is the most organized force among all the political forces in the Middle East and the Arab world. Moreover, secular, nationalist, leftist, or other religious forces, such as Salafism, have failed to stand up against the group. The United States and its allies in the Middle East were keenly aware of this fact. It also realizes that any democratic process in the region will lead to the Islamist's rise to power easily, which means that the region will witness an escalation in the direction of Islamization of government.

The administration of President Barack Obama saw the need to deal with the Muslim Brotherhood in order to pass its main and

secondary interests in the region. One of those primary interests are protecting Israel's security and its military superiority and spreading democracy in the region. On the other hand, the pro-US Arab regimes, such as President Hosni Mubarak, could be abandoned if the US administration finds a loyal alternative capable of achieving the main interests of the United States, those interests that the allied regimes have failed to achieve.

President Obama's speech, which was delivered in Cairo in 2009, showed a great desire to strengthen relations between Washington and the Middle East again. This trend emerged after the outbreak of what was known as the Arab Spring in 2011, in which Obama saw an opportunity for change that allowed the sacrifice of old allies such as former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and the replacement of them with new allies in order to promote American democracy in the region and acceptance of the existence of Israel.

The American agreement with the Muslim Brotherhood, which was done secretly between the leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood and the administration of President Obama, had failed with the fall of President Mohamed Morsi. This failure comes due to several forces that have stood against President Obama's policies in the Middle East, as follows:

First: the allies of the United States in the Middle East, led by Israel, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, stood against Obama's policy, especially in the Iranian nuclear file and the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood to power.

Second: the administration of President Obama himself, most of whose members were against the Muslim Brotherhood.

Third: the pressure of forces inside the United States of America represented by AIPAC, the pro-Israel media, members of Congress and the Senate who reject the Muslim Brotherhood.

The victory of President Donald Trump and his policies, which differed from the policies of President Obama, eliminated any hope for the Muslim Brotherhood to return to power, and thus the Muslim Brotherhood was removed from any political role in Egypt. Trump's latest decision was to designate the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist group to please his allies in the region.

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