



# **The Muslim Brotherhood: The History of the Middle East's Most Influential Islamist Group**

*Charles River Editors*

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In 2011, Egypt quickly became one of the most active countries during the Arab Spring, with Tahrir Square in Cairo becoming the focal point of both violent protests and peaceful political demonstrations. Inspired by the protesters in Tunisia, beginning in January 2011, Egyptians rallied to the square and in the streets by the thousands, marching, protesting, and calling for the fall of then-President Hosni Mubarak. Throughout the next several months until the overthrow of Mubarak in February 2011, millions of protesters from a wide range of socio-economic, ethnic, and religious backgrounds demanded a regime change across Egypt.

As significant as it was for the Egyptian people, the Egyptian Arab Spring was a key turning point for the Muslim Brotherhood – Egypt's largest and long-oppressed opposition group. The Brotherhood played a key role in organizing demonstrations, pitting the Egyptian and world media against the Mubarak regime, and orchestrating violent riots and clashes between civilian protesters and the Egyptian security forces, further portraying the regime in a negative light. But it was after the revolution that the Brotherhood truly reaped its rewards; it formed a legal political party and ran in the subsequent parliamentary elections, winning a large number of seats that were previously unavailable to them. Then, in June 2012, the Brotherhood made history in Egypt when it successfully managed to install its candidate Mohamed Morsi as president.

Perhaps no group was surprised by the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood's swift and largely unopposed rise to power than the Brotherhood itself; for decades, the group had suffered a long history of severe oppression and internal crises, but in the political environment created by the Arab Spring, it only took less than two years for the Brotherhood to control the Egyptian government. As it turned out, it was Islamists who reaped the greatest advantages of the Arab Spring, not only in Egypt, but abroad as well. In Tunisia, the Islamist Nahda party won the largest majority in the post-revolution elections and went on to lead the new government in a country that had endured the dictatorship of President Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali for five decades. Additionally, in other countries across the Arab world, Brotherhood-affiliated or Brotherhood-inspired parties won significant victories that would have been impossible a decade earlier; both the Brotherhood's Justice and Construction Party in Libya and the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria have made definitive gains in establishing political force and influence post-Arab Spring.

Despite the gains the group finally made after the Egyptian Arab Spring, as of September 2014, the Brotherhood has reverted to its former position as a banned organization. Mohamed Morsi was toppled by a military coup in July 2013, and on December 25, 2013, the Muslim Brotherhood was officially declared by the Egyptian government a terrorist organization. In the following months, tens of thousands of alleged Brotherhood members and suspected supporters were arrested, tried for vague charges of involvement in violent protests and clashes, and sentenced to jail; in an unprecedented ruling, an Egyptian court went so far as to sentence several hundred to death for their participation in riots that turned violent.

While the Muslim Brotherhood has always been centered in Egypt, its ideology and influence has been

exported by many individuals and affiliated groups over the decades, to the extent that just about every radical Sunni group across the Middle East has its roots in the Brotherhood, from Hamas to Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda. As a result, even as it remained a banned party in Egypt, it retained an outsized influence across the region.

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