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Not Anymore in Politics: Theorising the Young Egyptian Muslim Brothers' Political Disengagement in the aftermath of the 2013 Military Coup

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Abstract

This study relies on the life story narratives of 48 young members of the Egyptian Muslim Brothers in identifying the different reasons behind their political disengagement in the aftermath of the 2013 military coup. Unlike the SMT scholarly writings addressing Islamists' political disengagement within a limited scope of analysis that focuses on members leaving their groups rather than politics, this study presents a multi-layered approach that examines the interplay between youth's personal experiences, the repressive macro political conditions, and the organizational decay in shaping young Muslim Brothers' positions towards political activism.

Keywords: Political Disengagement, Political Apathy, the Muslim Brotherhood, Repression

'Given the domestic and global injustices, the state severe repression, and personal despair regarding any prospective change, the only thing we can do is to take care of ourselves and preserve our faith'

(Interview, 2017)

Introduction

While the 2011 uprising introduced a political opportunity for the Muslim Brotherhood's (MB) accession to power, following decades of political exclusion and repression, the leadership's lack of vision and disproportionate strategies fuelled anti-MB feelings among the public and prompted a swift military intervention in 2013 (Brown, 2014; Al-Anani, 2014; El-Sherif, 2014; Masoud, 2014). Instead of illustrating the diverse motivations that shaped Islamists' negative position towards political activism, recent studies have overemphasized the role of either the macro, meso, or micro factors while overlooking the impact of their interplay on individuals' disengagement (Al-Anani, 2019; Ardovini, 2020; Menshaway 2020 and 2021). The need for a complex relational model in the analysis of social movements' sustainability was expressed in Jasper and Volpi's (2018) call for unpacking the interplay between individuals' personal encounters and emotions with the existing opportunities and

limitations on their mobilization structures, and movements' protest strategies in order to overcome the domination of generalized behavioural patterns on the interpretations of members' choices. In response to this gap, this study addresses Islamists' political disengagement through a relational multi-level theoretical approach drawing on SMTs tools. In doing so, it addresses deficiencies within the SMTs literature investigating movements' demobilisation without examining the reasons behind individuals' political disengagement due to the difficulty of tracking members' personal trajectories (Beach, 1977 and Fillieule, 2015).

The study's relational multi-layered approach was inductively developed out of participants' personal narratives that conveyed the interplay between political macro conditions, the group dynamics, and micro-level personal experiences. Concerning the macro-level factors, interviewees posited that the Islamists-secular political polarisation and the increase of levels of demobilization in the aftermath of the 2013 military intervention were due to the state's severe repression along with the rise of contestations within the group that underlined ideological weakness and general dissatisfaction with leaders' collective strategy. Macro-level factors related to state repressive and internal fragmentations left members as prey to violent and traumatic personal encounters and instigated soaring feelings of despair, distrust, which inhibited them from political engagement.

Relying on an extensive fieldwork study based on 48 open-ended and semi-structured life story interviews conducted by one of the authors, this study investigates young Brothers' tendency toward political disengagement by drawing upon Political Opportunity Structures (POS), framing theory, and transformative personal experiences in delineating the reason behind this decision that lies within the intersection of macro, meso and micro level factors. Accordingly, the study is divided into three parts. While the first section explores scholarly writings addressing Islamists' disengagement, the second and third ones examine the study's research methodology and relational multi-layered approach delineating macro, meso, and micro level factors, respectively.

1. The Social Movement Theory (SMT) and Islamists' Disengagement

It was only in late 1980s that Islamic groups were studied through the lenses of SMT; nevertheless, the focus was Islamic insurgency from a grievance-based perspective and the Resource Mobilisation Theory (RMT) (Munson, 2001, Wickham, 2002, Wiktorowicz, 2002, Rank, 2015). In reaction to the instrumental and material nature of both approaches, the

cultural turn in addressing Political Opportunity Structures (POS) and Framing analysis were timidly introduced by a number of critical studies that emphasized the interaction between the ideology, organisational structures, modes of socialisation, and recruitment on one hand and repressive political contexts on the other (Drevon, 2016, Kandil, 2016, Wickham 2002, 2013, Munson, 2001); however, Islamists demobilization after transformative repressive events was obscured due to deficiency in addressing the death or demobilization of social groups within the SMT.

As mentioned earlier, studies addressing Islamists' political disengagement have exclusively focused on one level of analysis in unpacking the factors that have obstructed members' political activism. In his seminal work, Al-Anani (2019) examined the negative impact of state repression on the MB's survival by addressing the impact of these macro conditions on individuals' negative feelings and decision of political disengagement. In line with this argument, Jumet (2017) asserted that authoritarian contexts affect individuals' feelings and choices of political participation and lead to their withdrawal based on rational calculations related to the availability of structural/material resources for mobilization under authoritarian settings. In this vein, Wedeen (2018), in her book on the Syrian uprising, underlined the negative effects of al-Assad regime's repressive strategies on citizens' ability to politically engage in protests.

Other studies have mainly focused on meso-level factors by emphasizing the centrality of the impact of intra-movements' dynamics and ideological shifts on members' political withdrawal. Although Menshawy's (2020 and 2021) studies on young Brothers' disengagement have addressed three levels of analysis, they overemphasized the effect of the MB's organizational dynamics on members' decision of disengagement from the group rather than examining their position towards political activism in general due to the adoption of a limited definition of macro and micro level factors that were conceived around the MB's rise and fall and members' personal decision to leave the group and abandon its internal circles and ties respectively. In a similar vein, Ardovini (2020) underlined the negative impact of the MB's divisions among their ranks on the movement's coherence and prospective vision and plans in the aftermath of its dissolution in 2013. Also, Vannetzel (2016) and Willi (2020) emphasized the movement's intellectual and organizational stagnation, inability to develop innovative strategies for survival in adaptation to the state repression throughout its political history, and reliance on social embeddedness as a survival strategy, which dissociated young calibres from contributing the movement's tactical and strategic development and prompted them to leave. Capitalizing on the centrality of meso level factors in sustaining social movements, Ranko

(2015), Wiktorowicz (2002), and Wickham (2002) in their analysis of Islamists' activism, examined the impact of macro-level factors related to state repression on Islamists' mobilization capacities. Despite these studies' significant contribution, they have strikingly obscured the impact of micro level factors on members' disengagement from politics.

Focusing on the varying impact of micro-level factors on individuals' political decisions due to personal traumatic experiences and transformative events, Al-Masry and Ketchely's (2020) study and another by Brooke and Nugent (2020) confirmed that brutal transformative events have instigated strong emotions among members and incited them to sustain their collective action in resistance against state repression. In contrast to these studies' results, Matthies-Boon (2017) highlighted the negative effect of personal traumatic incidents on participants' psychological wellbeing and ability to persevere in political activism. In this respect, Pearlman (2013) asserted that individuals would be enthusiastic to engage in politics only if they developed positive emotions in response to their personal encounters, events, and repressive circumstances.

To pinpoint the interaction among the three levels of analysis in reference to Islamists' political activism in the Egyptian context, this paper demonstrates how young members' decision to politically withdraw is based on their interpretations of three level factors. It argues that young members decided to politically disengage in reaction to state repression, the MB's decaying ideology and failing collective frames during and after 2013, and personal negative encounters that instigated feelings of despair and loss. The novelty of this relational approach lies in its wider applicability to other social groups under repressive settings without providing oversimplified or reductionist explanations.

2. Research Methodology

The study's methodology is based on a narrative analysis approach of 48 open-ended and semi-structured interviews conducted by the first author as follows: 24 and 21 face-to-face meetings in Egypt and Turkey, respectively, and three Skype interviews with participants in Sweden, Egypt, and the Sudan. These interviews consisted of in-depth storytelling accounts in response to questions about the factors that shaped informants' experiences and stance towards political activism (Bryman, 2012; Bathmaker, 2010). Based on a chronological inquiry, interviewees adopted a life story narrative in providing details about their individual backgrounds, political experiences, and personal encounters within and outside the movement that shaped their feelings and thoughts toward political activism from 2011 to 2016. Informants have elaborated

on the impact of transformative personal experiences such as ideological exposure, political learning, imprisonment, and the witnessing of death tolls among friends and family members on their decision to politically disengage. The author adopted the open-ended and semi-structured format in designing interviews in order to allow respondents to tell their own stories throughout the different course of events and enable the author to ask follow-up questions revolving around their motivations, intentions, actions' results, and opinions about particular events and policies.

The fieldwork started with six open-ended interviews with two informants in London and four in Istanbul who acted as entry points for mapping the existing trends among young MB members. Based on these interviews, the author developed criteria for participants' selection such as individuals' varying positions towards the MB since the majority of respondents had developed a critical stance since 2011 and experienced critical political/organisational experience within and/or outside the movement.

The author faced two major challenges in selecting a representative sample of young MB members. First, the lack of a detailed documentation addressing the MB membership in terms of number, age, geographical distribution, gender, and educational and economic status. Second, the difficulty of assigning criteria of selection for interviewees in light of members' complicated profiles and the movement's non-monolithic nature entailing members with various religious, ideological, socioeconomic, and educational backgrounds.

In order to ensure informants' safety, the author conducted most of the interviews in open areas, arranged online interviews through a secured medium such as Skype, used pseudonyms in order to conceal participants' identity, and adopted an empathetic and positive listening toward participants' stories that included feelings of regret and revealed deep traumatic experiences (Clandinin and Murphy, 2007).

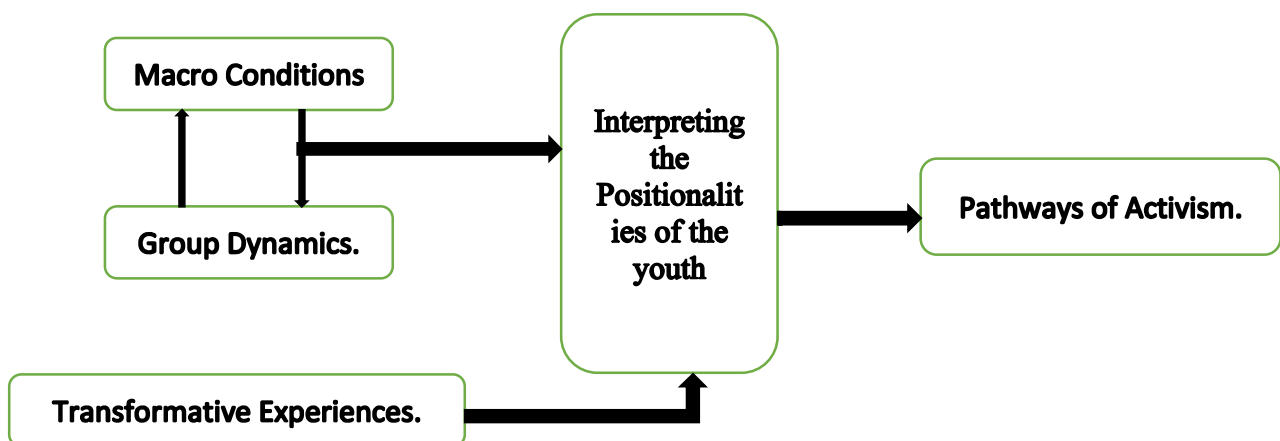
3. A Relational Multilayered Theoretical Framework in the Analysis of the Young MB Members' Political Disengagement

The study's relational and multi-layered theoretical framework was developed in order to answer the following question: how is it possible to understand the different factors underpinning the MB's youth disengagement and unleash their interplay in light of respondents' narratives? Given the difficulty of identifying stable and causal relationships between youth pathways of activism and characteristics such as age, ideological background, organisational affiliation, and transformative personal experiences, this study relied on the

SMTs in order to situate individuals' decision of disengagement within a wider context of Egyptian politics, the MB's internal dynamics, and members' personal encounters. Instead of making sweeping generalisations about the MB's youth disengagement, the SMTs underlined the interaction among multileveled factors that induced members to politically disengage (Baron and Gunning, 2014). This study fills this gap by addressing how respondents' life stories revealed young members' negative stance toward political activism and partisan politics in general as an outcome of three levels of analysis. In this vein, the macro-level factors explore the state political repression and the MB-state interaction following 2013 while the meso-level and micro-level ones investigate the negative impact of MB's internal contestations on the youth position toward political activism and delineate members' narratives and transformative stories respectively.

The study's interactive model engages with the SMTs rising trends that seek to overcome the primacy of structure over agency by giving more attention to an individual's micro, meso, and macro foundations behind actions and decisions (Jasper and Volpi, 2018; Gunning, 2009). It examines how young members have perceived their personal experiences, interpreted the state repression, and reacted to the MB's ideological fragmentation through their decision of political disengagement.

Figure 1 Relational Approach for MB Young Members Political Engagement



A. The Macro-Level Factors: Political Opportunity Structures and the State Repression following the 2013 Military Coup

The macro-level factors are unpacked through discussions of the Political Opportunity Structure (POS) and the state repression-mobilisation nexus. This section relies on the constructionist turn in the SMTs literature that underlined the existing gap between members and the MB leadership by emphasizing the importance of structural factors related to political opportunities and individuals' interpretations of those opportunities in defining actors' actions and protest cycles (Kurzman, 2004).

Informants' narratives highlighted the existing gap between the MB leadership and young members' perception of macro-level factors following the 2013 Rab'aa and al-Nahda massacres. Resulting in the death of more than one thousand members in less than six hours (HRW Report, 2014), this incident signaled the beginning of unprecedented waves of imprisonment, killing, and torture among the MB ranks that exceeded the state repression during the so-called 'tribulation' period in the 1950s and 1960s (Brown and Dunne, 2015). In December 2013, the state outlawed the MB, declared it a terrorist group, and launched a fierce repression campaign against its cadres and rank-and-file members. Between 2014 and 2016, more than 7000 civilians, including children, professors, and political activists, were tried before military courts. Relying on confessions extracted under torture, these courts sentenced 21 defendants to death among whom six were executed in May 2015 without the completion of the appeal procedures that proved them innocent. On 2 January 2016, another four civilians were tortured and executed without a full investigation and provision of evidence. Between 2013-2015, more than 3000 protesters were killed, 16000 were arrested during protests, and 529 were sentenced to death for killing a police officer in March 2014. The Egyptian National Council of Human Rights reported the abduction and disappearance of 266 persons between April and March 2015. Human Rights Watch and the International Commission of Missing People have later confirmed the disappearance of more than 200 people between August and September 2015. Upon their release, detainees told horrendous stories of torture through assembly-line beatings, electric shocks, stress positions and rape in addition to the extraction of testimonies and charges for false accusations of crimes they did not commit (Human Rights Watch, 2015). Stories of torture, death, unfair trials, the inhumane conditions of detention, the violation of detainees' rights through threats of sexual assault to prisoners and family members have obstructed members' ability to continue protesting.

In response to the state repression, the MB leadership relied on an unsuccessful twofold strategy that capitalized on the potential rise of divisions within the ruling elite and the mobilization of the 'Anti Coup Movement' protests (Ketchley, 2017). Since 2012, the state bureaucracy and security bodies have cultivated intense anti-MB sentiments among the public

and used them to maintain public solidarity toward the regime. Moreover, the failure of uprisings in Syria, Libya, and Yemen have fuelled an antagonistic regional context toward Islamists and prompted a military takeover of power. The post-2013 Egyptian regime has swiftly consolidated its rule thanks to the Saudi and Emirati financial solidarity and the support of the Trump administration. On the other hand, the MB's mobilization efforts, despite protests' momentum and success in restoring the 25th of January repertoires of action through calls for weekly protests, have failed to build a public consensus against the coup and/or diffuse conflict among larger groups in the society. Due to the state repression and the leadership's inability to cope with it, protests faded into smaller, flexible, and decentralized groups over the time. By mid-September 2014, the anti-coup groups, including groups such as Women, Students, and Youth Against the Coup became semi-independent from the MB guidance and could neither develop a pro-Islamist politicized identity nor generate new cycles of protest. As a result, the MB, becoming a decentralised movement, reached a crossroads, lost its control over the organisation, and became unable to sustain protests under the state intense arrest campaigns (Ketchley, 2016; Brown and Dunne, 2015). Members have either left the movement or frozen their memberships while the family 'Osra' meetings, which constituted the movement's main cultivation units, have stopped their meetings in different governorates for fear of state repression.

This unprecedented wide-scale repression in the movement's history has enticed members to reconsider their political activism especially with the surge of intra-group contestations against the MB's ideological stagnation and philosophy of gradual reform that limited its mobilization capacity and left members prey to traumatic personal experiences.

B. The Meso-Level Factors: The MB Intra Contestation over Frames of Collective Actions

In order to understand the MB's intra-group contestations, the study resorted to SMTs' framing approach in analyzing spaces of contestations among members. Benford and Snow (1988 and 2000) defined framing as the processes of assigning meanings to and/or interpreting relevant events and conditions in order to mobilise adherents and constituents, gain bystanders' support, and demobilise antagonists. Frames represent movements shift from static ideological imperatives to an active translation of meaning through the politics of signification and the adoption of collective action frames in the aim of establishing legitimacy and attracting followers and supporters. According to Goffman (1974), frames refer to the 'schemata of interpretation' that enable members to locate, perceive, identify, and

label their social reality. Being the product of contested discursive processes, members develop frames in order to identify problems and initiate prognostic solutions, tactics, and strategies. The resonance of these frames is conditioned by empirical credibility, strategies' efficacy, belief and actions' consistency, and narratives' fidelity in terms of reflecting consistency between the audience culture and everyday struggles (Benford and Snow, 2000).

The MB's intra-group contestations took place among conservative, revisionist, and apologist members. Participants affiliated to the conservative group have justified leaders' decisions and stayed in the movement after 2013 even following their decision to freeze their membership for security reasons. While they were emotionally resilient and embarrassed to share negative stories and critiques about the movement, the reluctant and apologetic members, despite their dissatisfaction with the MB's political performance, trusted the leaderships' prudence in light of their limited experience with other political groups. Unlike conservative and apologist members, the revisionist group encompassed bloggers and affiliates to students' committees who questioned the Brothers' rhetoric and decision-making mechanisms since 2005, left the movement following the 2011 uprising and the 2013 military intervention because of the MB's failure and exile. However, following 2013, these three groups coalesced in their critical position toward the MB's decisions based on personal experiences of political learning, intellectual exposure, and dissatisfaction with the movement's post-coup strategy.

The MB's prognostic frames toward reform have enabled the movement to maintain its internal coherence vis-à-vis intra-group contestations that emerged before the 2011 uprising. They have historically evolved around the establishment of a parallel community, the multiplication of the movement's roles, and the adoption of a gradual reform. Although the intra-group contestations have persisted after the 2011 uprising, the MB leadership adopted solidarity tactics such as the strict promotion policies, the marginalisation of critical voices, anti-intellectual attitudes against social sciences, social and family bonds, the promotion of leaders' sanity culture, and the romanticization of the movement's history (Kandil, 2016). Starting from the early 1990s, the MB intensified its recruitment process in rural areas in order to transpose rural traditions related to the elderly authority, the youth obedience, and loyalty to the movement, which ensured the conservative wing's domination in the movement, widened the existing gap between leaders and young members, and increased intra-group contestations against the movement's ideology and diagnostic and prognostic frames toward reform (Tammam, 2011).

The multiplication of roles was encapsulated in al-Banna's reference to the movement as the byproduct of a Salafi call, a Sunni approach, a Sufi truth, a political institution, an athletic group, a scientific and cultural society, an economic organization, and a social idea (Ghanem, 1992). In fulfilment of these roles, the movement recruited new members who acted as a vanguard that internalized Islamic hegemony and adopted a gradual reform starting from the individual level until the establishment of the Islamic Caliphate.

With regard to the MB's multiplication of roles, a former female member expressed her negative perception of the movement's ability to induce political change on the basis of gradual reform. In her words:

Based on different readings, I started to perceive the MB as an obstacle (Mo'aaatel) against reform instead of being a tool or a catalyst of change. Social changes occur either through the ruling elite's initiative or revolutions instigated by social movements. However, I have never heard of a social group that managed to get that done on its own. The MB's multiplicity of roles and creation of a parallel state have ensured the state survival through the provision of socioeconomic services instead of changing the state mechanisms of service provision. (Interview, 25 December 2016).

In light of this critique, the multiplicity of roles and the gradual reform presented a key pillar for the movement's prognostic frames of action, which resulted in the loss of the MB's ideological meaning and the rise of dissatisfaction with the movement's goals and tools among its ranks. It was not only the movement's impaired prognostic frame of reform but also inconsistencies between the movement's goal of radical change and tools of action based on the gradual reform, exclusive tools for recruitment, and an inclusive strategy of mobilisation. A former key cadre in the students' section has underlined these discrepancies between the MB's ideology and actions:

I joined the MB because it was the most powerful opposition group against the regime but its gradual reform ideology was not taking us anywhere. The system cannot be reformed from within. Change should take place from outside through a revolutionary movement. The MB's mission aims at accomplishing radical changes, however, this cannot happen through soft tools like elections. My first question for the leadership is 'Do we really want to change the regime or just act as its enemy?' and the second one is related to the group's identity, 'Is it an open social group or a closed one? There have

been criteria for recruitment, which means that the group is not an open one. However, secret and closed groups do not seek gradual nor partial changes! (Interview, 17 March 2017).

This inconsistency was also conveyed by a 27 year old former female member who described the movement as an elitist and exclusionist group. She added:

The movement targeted middle class members who already have a conservative religious background and interest in social and political activism. There has been no inclusion for the most deprived and uneducated segments. This exclusionist nature resulted in the absence of the group's back-up support when the regime challenged it in 2013. (Interview, 20 March 2017).

Participants expressed disagreements over the movement's recruitment strategy and ideology. Doing so, they underlined the lack of credibility and efficacy for the MB's frames of actions in light of their disconnection from people's everyday struggles and inability to counter state repression. Relying on rigid selection criteria and a closed cultivation process, the movement failed in rallying members from broader social groups against the regime and was only appealing to middle and high-income conservative classes with limited socioeconomic interests, which accelerated the failure of the MB's post coup frames of actions and generated feelings of despair and skepticism toward the possibility of political change among individuals.

C. The Micro-Level Factors: Individuals' Emotions and Transformative Experiences

Scholarly writings have emphasized state repression as a transformative event that produces emotions of moral shock among activists who perceive it as either a force for protest escalation or an obstacle to demobilisation and incitation for individual withdrawal (Francisco, 2004; Earl, 2003). Also, Jasper et al. (2001) have underscored the centrality of emotions in analysing social movements' mobilisation and demobilisation since they can either help or hinder mobilisation efforts and shape actors' interpretations of opportunities. In this vein, Pearlman (2013) explained how feelings of pride, anger, and joy may promote an optimistic assessment of actions and risk acceptance while feelings of fear and sadness develop pessimistic perceptions, risk aversion strategies, and a low sense of control. In line with this argument, Van Stekelenburg and Klandermans (2013) asserted that emotions act as accelerators and amplifiers within social movements that accelerate actions and express the plausibility of motivations emphasizing notions like politicised collective identity and political solidarity that can turn

state repression into a transformative event leading to the radicalisation and growth of protest. However, Brian (2009) asserted that strong feelings of fear and inability to cope with repression would rather lead to disengagement.

Based on informants' accounts, young members who decided to disengage from politics, being from different age groups and backgrounds, shared feelings of frustration, distrust of political actors, and despair regarding the possibility of witnessing a real political change in Egypt. These feelings combined with a belief in the role of education and personal development in achieving worldly emancipation. Although members have been politically active since 2011, their political engagement following the 2013 Rab'aa massacre was justified by the need to release feelings of rage, loss, and defeat in solidarity with victims and in expression of a moral obligation to defend the gains of the 2011 revolutionary moment. Nevertheless, this temporal wave of activism was followed by soaring attitudes of apathy and despair since young members revisited their positions in light of the state repression and their negative perception of the MB leadership.

1. Apathy and Political Withdrawal

Osama, a 23 year old former member said,

I participated in a post-coup protest but the country was forcing us to leave. I decided to forget about politics and to focus on my work and study (Interview, 29 January 2017).

A similar position was expressed by Mohammed, a former member who said,

I stopped writing or sharing anything about Egypt on Facebook. Frustration is part of our experience, we do not believe that there is any hope to get prisoners out of jail (Interview, 4 March, 2017).

In addition to feelings of frustration, blaming the MB's lack of political strategy reinforced political abstention among young members. In this vein, Jihad, a 23 year old former female member in the student anti-coup movement said,

I do not participate in any activities now because there is no strategy for what is after the ouster of the regime. I cannot cheer in a protest and call for 'the fall of the regime' 'Isqat el Nizam' and I cannot take responsibility for mobilising people to do that,

because there is no strategy for it. The current regime does not bother having another bloodshed, I cannot mobilise people for their death. It is better to die for a goal (Interview, 9 March 2017).

In line with Jihad, Hamza, a 23 year old former member in the anti-coup student movement, justified his withdrawal from politics with the MB's failure to initiate change:

I am very furious. I do not follow or pay attention to news in Egypt. I believe the MB leadership is responsible for the death of members in Rab'aa. They were ready to sacrifice our bodies to stop a conspiracy against Islam. Sacrificing people's souls should not be an option. I do not see there is a possibility for change and that is why everyone should focus on his work and personal life. (Interview, 15 March 2017).

The thrust of Hamza's narrative was also expressed by informants who took part in the Presidential Palace confrontations and felt that the movement used the bodies of rank-and-file members as human shields in its fight against the state. The symbolic image of the movement as a protector or refuge for young members has been transformed into that of an organisation that only recognises young members as tools for mobilisation, which is a drastic change in the movement's image in the eyes of its members.

2. Resorting to Non-Political Activities

Other young members decided to politically disengage while taking part in non-political activities in the aim of initiating reforms in all walks of individuals' lives away from politics and the state repression. Heba, a female member, echoed this trend through her initiative of a cultural and educational project that, according to her, acts as a public avenue for people to experience free learning.

I wanted to give people the opportunity to compare and judge ideas regardless of their political orientations and ideologies. The ability to understand and to judge is preliminary for any action, especially at times of political crisis. This does not mean that I do not believe in the importance of political tools of reform, on the contrary, politics are still important, given our current situation. Changing the state is a priority, but it is hard. (Interview, 25 December 2016).

Khadija, a 23 year old member who used to be active since the age of 18, presented a different rationale for political disengagement. In contrast with Heba's reconciliatory perspective about politics and the modern spheres of power, Khadija's position developed since the Rab'aa massacre on the basis of a critical view of the modern nation-state structure and institutions. In her words, she said:

I was guarding the gates of the Rab'aa Square on the day of the attack. I continued until the last minute when we were forced to evacuate the place. I participated in all protest activities after that. I was eager to transfer information to international media channels about what really happened. But my perception started to change after being close to a researcher from the University of Manchester, who was conducting an ethnographic study about Islamists' ideology on democracy. By helping her in meeting informants, I realised the double standards talk in Islamists' speeches to international media. I asked myself: To what extent would we consider our political activism as an Islamic one and what are the activities that would lead to the establishment of an Islamic state? Consequently, I reconsidered my ideas and found out that Islam has been instrumentally used by Islamists who do not really have an idea about authentic Islamic governance. I felt that we were designing our ideology to fit with the Western standards of moderation but not to what we really believe in...I now believe that living the Islamic spirit requires people to be isolated from the modern world's institutions of socialisation. To develop our own model, we need to live on the margins of this system. Home schooling can be a means toward achieving this attempt. For me, this is the Jihad we should do now in order to produce our lifestyles and economic structures. If we build alternative systems, we can face the scenario of the modern state defeat and failure because the end of the military rule will result in the stepping down of the military institution. This would be a case of chaos in Egypt, if we do not have an alternative system. Because of this position, I do not believe that any current political activity will be an ethical one. Changing the head of the state will not bring any change since he would follow the same rules of the game. Thus, I would go only for societal work that is the sole means to create an alternative system to the modern one. (Interview, 5 March 2017).

Khadija's isolationist thinking was not shared by other young members who just preferred

political abstention. Her intellectual position was based on critical/rational readings of modernity and the need to build an alternative system that would evince the ruling elite and act as a prognostic frame for resistance instead of ruminating temporal feelings of guilt and frustration. Her story outlines how different variables, such as ideological introspections involving Islamists' practices and rhetoric, condition the youth choices of activism and abstention. Perceiving the MB as a mirror for Western modernity with an Islamic garnish, Khadija's accounts included stories of conceptual revisions of the MB discourse about Jihad, art, and the nation-state and critiques of the movement's accommodating educational curriculum toward nation-state and Capitalism.

Another former female member questioned the worthiness of sacrificing her friends' lives for the 2011 Revolution and the Rab'aa massacre. In this regard, she mentioned,

Given the domestic and global injustices, the severity of the state repression, and the absence of a prospect for change, I think the only thing we can do is to take care of ourselves and preserve our faith. (Interview, 20 March 2017).

Her accounts emphasized that domestic and international injustices cannot be revoked by collective actions on the domestic level since global power relations obstruct real change in the Arab world. Youth imagination has, accordingly, moved from social heroism to rational calculations of actions and strategies. Positions toward political engagement changed through a process of emotional appraisal, including the questioning of protests and political activism's efficacy given the state severe repression and international injustices. Protests seemed an exhausted alternative that lacked resonance with Egyptians' daily economic struggles.

Conclusion

Scholars addressing Islamists' political disengagement have focused on limited scope of analysis associating disengagement to leaving Islamic groups rather than examining members' perception of political activism within repressive settings. This study presents a relational multilevel theoretical framework that has a wider applicability to other Islamic groups acting under repressive regimes. The study argues that the young MB members' position towards political activism has been a by-product of a rational interpretation of the impact of the state repression since 2013, the movement's ideological decay, and personal encounters with traumatic events on the possibility of inducing political change and engaging into politics.

Informants' testimonies underlined to what extent the interaction of the three factors stemming from the macro, meso, and micro-levels of analysis is a stepping stone toward the end of the MB's political activism. The youth's political apathy expresses their exhaustion of potential rewards for involvement into protests and political activities under repressive conditions. The exhaustion of rewards, conveyed through shared emotions of frustration and guilt, was justified by the state unprecedented repression since 2013 and the failure of the MB's strategies of mobilization following the Rab'aa massacre. The macro-level variable combined with the MB's loss of ideological meaning and members' loss of hope following personal encounters.

Participants' narratives highlighted the interplay between personal emotions resulting from traumatic encounters and the macro-level repression. Feelings of despair following Islamists' failure to politically mobilize against the state and the anti-MB public backlash introduced a discourse that underlined futility and political hatred against ordinary Egyptians who supported the Sisi regime. Young members' engagement into non-political activities expressed an understated critique toward the MB leaders' narrow vision and ineffective strategies of reform that restricted members' focus to organizational and moral fields of action without developing efficient mechanisms of survival based on an understanding of the modern state's philosophy. They have equally perceived apathy and non-political engagements as indirect means for avoiding the state repression and the security hegemony over the public sphere. This trend breaks with Islamists' public engagement and self-perception as the only long-standing opposition group while emphasizing a coping mechanism that enabled young members to deal with negative feelings of despair, shame, and guilt.

According to McAdam and Swell (2001), events, by acting as mediating tools between long-term changes and cycles of conflict, can turn into either a master template for protest repertoires or a hurdle to overcome. Drawing on the Egyptian experience, the 2011 Revolution produced master templates for occupying squares and organizing sit-in protests that became exhausted due to public polarisation, popular anti-MB attitudes, and the decrease of protests' rewards under the state repression in 2013. Therefore, the young MB members shifted positions toward *self-care* and *self-preservation* instead of persisting in a risky political engagement. Protests have degenerated into a force for young members' demobilisation in light of their perception as risky actions and an exhausted strategy instead of being an effective anti-coup strategy.

Participants' narratives have obviously shown how political struggles and individuals' actions are the results of the interaction between their political context, organisational affiliations, emotions and perceptions following personal transformative events. They underlined how questions about the ability to create a counter-strategy in order to reach a

consensus among opposition groups and/or break solidarity networks among the ruling elite became central to the development of youth mobilisation. The state repression and political polarisation precluded the possibility of producing a new counter-strategy, which prompted young members to abstain from politics until the emergence of a new wave of protest or the disintegration of solidarity networks among the ruling elite. The decision of disengagement has also been established on a critical position toward the modern political actions of reform rather than being a temporary reaction to repressive conditions as indicated by some participants.

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