

The Muslim Brotherhood weighs its options amid political challenges

by [Taylor Luck](#) in the [August 3, 2016](#) issue

(*The Christian Science Monitor*) The Muslim Brotherhood lost its last real stronghold in the Arab world when Jordan shuttered the movement's headquarters in Amman this spring.

Just five years after the movement's star seemed to be rising, as Qatar and Turkey sought to export Islamism after the Arab Spring from the Gulf to North Africa, the Brotherhood is suffering from a crackdown in Egypt and faces bans in much of the Arab Gulf.

The movement must decide whether to yield to younger members agitating for a more aggressive approach or carve out a new identity—perhaps in the model of Tunisia's Muslim democrats. Some worry that if it fails to regain clout as a legitimate political movement, the result could be further extremism in the region.

By preventing the Brotherhood from carrying out its religious and social services, observers warn that the Jordanian government—and others across the region—have opened the way for hard-line Salafists to fill the void.

Jordan shut down the Brotherhood in April, claiming the 60-year-old organization was improperly licensed. Officials gave no other reason for the decision, but observers and government insiders say it was retribution for the group's role in Arab Spring protests in Jordan and demands for the country to shift to a constitutional monarchy and roll back the king's powers.

The government has since closed several branches of the movement's political arm, the Islamic Action Front, frozen the Brotherhood's assets, prevented senior members from leaving the country, and banned the movement from holding Ramadan activities such as hosting iftar meals for the needy to break their fasts.

The IAF is taking part in Jordan's parliamentary elections in September but can neither raise funds nor hold rallies. A governor's order banning the Brotherhood from holding internal elections has crippled the movement.

"They are waging a war on us," said Ali Abu Sukkar, deputy of the IAF and senior Jordan Brotherhood official.

In their place, Salafists are sponsoring iftar meals. Ultraconservative Salafist leaders dominate the airwaves. In Egypt, Salafists such as the al-Nour Party are the only Islamists in parliament.

"The losses suffered by the Muslim Brotherhood are a victory for Salafists who are trying to control the narrative of Islam," said Hassan Abu Haniyeh, a Jordanian scholar of Islamist movements.

The Brotherhood's youth leadership is now looking for a more aggressive, assertive Brotherhood than in the past, in order to respond to regional pressures.

"It is a question of whether the Muslim Brotherhood should work to return to power in the long term and focus instead on *dawah* [proselytizing], or whether it should work on a return to power in the near term," said Eric Trager, a fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. "The young generation saw the Brotherhood have their moment in power and—in their eyes—taken away from them. They want to return now."

But while the crackdown is pushing some young activists to become hard-line, the pressure is also having the opposite effect: pushing many leaders to consider making the movement more moderate, appealing to non-Islamists and appearing less threatening to regimes.

Central to this effort is separating the Brotherhood's preaching from politics. By doing so, the movement's leaders believe that they can avoid the intimidation and animosity it stirred among leftist and secular political groups in Egypt who later backed overthrowing the leaders.

"Separating the preaching from the politics is not just a theory, it has become a necessity," Abu Sukkar said. "The times are changing, and we have to change."

The Brotherhood sees a model in Ennahda, the Tunisian party that has twice taken part in coalition governments with secular parties. It announced recently that it was ending all religious activities and shedding its "Islamist" label. Their new title: Muslim democrats.

Such a rebranding, Brotherhood leaders believe, would allow it to reenter Jordanian politics and open up opportunities in the Arab Gulf and elsewhere.

Yet due to leadership struggles within the Jordanian and Egyptian Brotherhood, the idea has stalled—pushing some Brotherhood leaders to set out on their own and establish separate Muslim democrat parties.

Salem Fallahat, former overall leader of the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan, is gathering like-minded Brotherhood leaders fed up with the movement’s rigidity and non-Islamists to follow in the steps of Ennahda.

The new party, which will be called Hukama, or the Wise, is to be a national unity party, with its core tenets inspired by Islam but with the word *Islam* left off the policy agenda.

“What we need right now is a political movement supported by Islamists, not an Islamist movement,” Fallahat said.

Yet observers and rival Brotherhood members have cast doubt over whether such defections can be successful without the movement’s broad religious and social services.

“Islamist parties are not traditional parties, and that is what makes them effective,” said Shadi Hamid of the Brookings Institution, whose book, *Islamic Exceptionalism*, details the evolution of movements such as the Brotherhood.

“They draw on a larger movement which makes them successful—when you give that up, you are giving up one of your main electoral advantages.”

But scholars say it is too early to write off the movement.

The Brotherhood plays an active role behind the scenes in the Syrian opposition, while its Islah party in Yemen is waiting in the wings to play a role in the country’s reconstruction after the current conflict ends.

“The Middle East is quite fluid—even if the movement is weak one day, in the next few days it can reemerge as a powerful actor,” Hamid said.

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