

## Islamic Democrats?



At 2 in the morning, a few days after I arrived in Cairo last month, a text message beeped into my cellphone: “Mahmoud Ghazlan, MB Guide Bureau, is being arrested NOW.” Ghazlan was only the latest prominent member of the Muslim Brotherhood, an Islamist organization that commands deep loyalty in Egypt’s security apparatus. In recent months, leaders of the organization, Hosni Mubarak’s businessmen thought to be financial backers and other members of the brotherhood’s Guidance Bureau have been arrested on a variety of charges. Forty members of the group have been indicted under Egypt’s emergency laws and put under the jurisdiction of a military tribunal, which is likely to give them long jail sentences.

The arrest and imprisonment of political opponents is nothing new in Egypt, which has been ruled by a succession of authoritarian leaders since 1952; secular democrats are in jail along with the Islamists. Egypt is generally rated as one of the more repressive countries in the world’s most repressive region. But two years ago, responding in part to White House pressure, the regime of President Hosni Mubarak allowed parliamentary elections to take place under conditions of unprecedented political freedom — at least initially. And the brotherhood, though a banned organization that had to run candidates as independents, dominated the contest until the government cracked down in later rounds of voting. The organization still took 88 of the 454 seats in Egypt’s lower house, the People’s Assembly, becoming, in effect, the first opposition party of Egypt’s modern era.

But it is not simply numbers that make the brotherhood a threat from the regime’s point of view. While Mubarak and his allies regularly denounce the brothers as fundamentalists bent on turning Egypt into a theocracy, the new legislators have made common cause with judges, liberal intellectuals and secular activists in calling for increased

political freedom. They have steered clear of cultural or religious issues. Abdel Monem Abou el-Fotouh, one of Ghozlan's colleagues on the Guidance Bureau, said to me flatly, "We are not a religious body." Only one of his 15 fellow guides, he said, is a sheik, or religious authority — "and even he is political." While many secular critics fear that the brotherhood harbors a hidden Islamist agenda, so far the organization has posed a democratic political challenge to the regime, not a theological one; and that makes it all the more dangerous.

In his 2005 Inaugural Address, President Bush traced out the logic of a new, post-9/11 American foreign policy. "For as long as whole regions of the world simmer in resentment and tyranny," he declared, violence "will gather . . . and cross the most defended borders" — i.e., our own. Therefore, he announced, "it is the policy of the United States to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world." Thus was born the Freedom Agenda; and Egypt occupied the [Al Qaeda](#) bull's-eye on this new target. Egypt was an authoritarian state that had supplied much of the leadership of . It is also the largest nation in the Arab world and, historically, the center of the region's political and cultural life. Progress in Egypt's sclerotic political system would resonate all over the Islamic world. The nearly \$2 billion a year in military and economic aid that the U.S. had been providing since the Camp David accords in 1979 offered real leverage. And Egypt's early experience of democratic government (from 1922 to 1952), mostly under British occupation, and its lively community of democratic and human rights activists gave political reform a firmer foundation than it had elsewhere in the Arab world.

As it happened, presidential and parliamentary elections were scheduled for 2005. Not long after his inaugural address, President Bush called Mubarak to urge him to allow independent monitors to oversee the elections and to loose the asphyxiating controls on political activity and the press. For his part, Mubarak needed to respond not only to Washington but also to a rising tide of domestic dissent — and to the continued enfeeblement of his own National Democratic Party, which performed badly in legislative elections five years earlier. He agreed to hold Egypt's first contested presidential elections and to permit unprecedented, if carefully circumscribed, political freedom. The , which in years past had allowed the regime to control the hundreds of [Agency for International Development](#) U.S. millions of dollars it spent in Egypt, earmarked \$50 million for democracy and governance; much of the money went to the training of political party activists and election monitors.

The Muslim Brotherhood was not at that time a major force in national electoral politics. Since its founding in 1928, the brotherhood had sunk deep roots in the country's urban working and middle classes, and especially among the professions, establishing a powerful base in the "syndicates" that represent doctors, lawyers, journalists and others. The organization began dipping its toes in the water of parliamentary electioneering in the mid-'80s; in 2000 it gained 17 seats. But the group responded to the new climate of openness by fielding a much larger slate of candidates for the 2005 elections — 160 in all. Candidates from old-line Nasserist and left-wing parties ran as well.

After decades of quiet organizing, the Islamists proved to be far more popular, and more disciplined, than the

isolated leaders of Mubarak's ruling party expected. In the first of three rounds of voting, the brothers won so many seats that the regime grew alarmed. In the second round, the police restricted access to polling areas in brotherhood strongholds; the Islamists still won most of the seats they sought. In the third round, the regime pulled out all the stops: despite the presence of hundreds of American-trained election monitors, security forces beat up and arrested opposition activists and shut down voting booths. In the end, election violence would claim 14 lives. Video footage showed old women in head scarves and veils scaling ladders to reach polling places — this in a country notorious for dismal turnout. The regime had feared a surge of support for secular opposition forces like Ghad, a new party founded by Ayman Nour, a charismatic figure who also opposed Mubarak in the presidential race, or Tagammu, the traditional party of the left. These were the groups that the Bush administration's democracy agenda was designed to promote. But they proved to have relatively little national following; few voters risked arrest to cast a ballot in their behalf.

The brotherhood quickly proved that it was not only popular, but savvy. The leaders understood that it was not in their interests to provoke a confrontation with the regime and its hair-trigger security forces. They fielded candidates in only a fraction of the districts they could have won. According to Joshua Stacher, an American scholar of Egyptian politics who lives in Cairo, a brotherhood politician who projected winning 17 seats in his governorate was instructed by his superior to come back with a smaller number. Only when he whittled the figure to seven was he told to go ahead. The brotherhood won six of the seats. Stacher also notes that when the brotherhood held a press conference (which he attended) four days after the election to introduce their new legislators, a reporter asked Muhammad Akef, the "supreme guide," if they would be prepared to talk to the Americans. And Akef answered, "Yes, but they should forward the request to the Egyptian Foreign Ministry." He was saying both that the brotherhood was open to dialogue and that it had nothing to hide from the regime.

The brotherhood bloc took Parliament a great deal more seriously than the ruling party did. The entire 88-person contingent moved into a hotel in Cairo in order to be able to work and live together while the People's Assembly was in session. Merely showing up changed the dynamic of this torpid body, since N.D.P. lawmakers had to attend as well lest they be outvoted. The brothers formed a "parliamentary kitchen" with committees on various subjects; the committees, in turn, organized seminars to which outside experts were regularly invited. The Islamists formed a coalition with other opposition legislators, and with sympathetic members of the N.D.P., to protest the extension of emergency rule. They stood in solidarity with judges who were protesting growing infringements on their autonomy; hundreds of protesters, including some of the brotherhood's major figures, were arrested during several weeks of demonstrations in central Cairo. In an article in the journal *Middle East Report*, Joshua Stacher and Samer Shehata, a professor at Georgetown, concluded, "Brotherhood M.P.'s are attempting to transform the Egyptian parliament into a real legislative body, as well as an institution that represents citizens and a mechanism that keeps government accountable."

Many members of Egypt's secular opposition remain deeply skeptical of the brotherhood, which they see as the regime's silent ally in blocking their hopes for an open, pluralist society. Egypt's ruling elite has, in turn, traditionally worried far more about the secular opposition than about the Islamists. Anwar el-Sadat, the president from 1970 to his assassination in 1981, made peace with religious forces by initiating a thoroughgoing Islamization

of Egyptian society. Sadat rewrote the educational curriculum along religious lines and amended Article 2 of Egypt's extremely progressive constitution to stipulate that Shariah — Islamic law — was the “main source” of the nation's laws. Mubarak, who was Sadat's vice president, continued this practice. Some secularists fear that the brotherhood, perhaps in collaboration with the military, would establish an authoritarian theocracy. “I have no doubt that they would implement Shariah if they ever came to power,” says Hisham Kassem, a leading publisher in the progressive media. “I see them as a menace.”

But opinions are shifting. After holding a symposium on free speech, Negad al-Borai, a democracy activist and human rights lawyer, says that he received an emissary from the supreme guide. “He came and said: ‘We accept everything in your initiative as a beginning to the democratic process. The only thing we ask is that if issues arise where we wish to state our opposition according to our own views, we can have our own voice.’” Al-Borai readily, the Egyptian dissident most [Saad Eddin Ibrahim](#) agreed, and the brotherhood endorsed untrammelled free speech. widely known in the West, says that the performance of the brotherhood's parliamentary bloc over the last year has allayed his own concerns. The regime, he says, is brandishing the Islamist threat in order “to scare the foreigners and the middle class and the Copts” Egypt's ancient Christian minority, who fear being treated as “nonbelievers.”

Indeed, since the 2005 election and the brotherhood's subsequent performance, the regime has turned the full force of its repressive energies on it. Last April and May, when brotherhood members demonstrated in solidarity with Egypt's judges, who had been seeking greater autonomy, security forces waded in, arresting hundreds of the brothers. The campaign of arrests resumed earlier this year, aiming at leading figures like Mahmoud Ghozlan, the Guidance Bureau member, as well as financiers; the government has frozen assets of brotherhood supporters said to amount to \$2 billion. And there could be no mistaking the intent of the constitutional “reforms” submitted last December. Article 5, which lays the basis for the regulation of political parties, was rewritten to stipulate that “political activity or political parties shall not be based on any religious background or foundation.” This prohibition seemed to directly contradict the language of Article 2, which made Shariah the foundation of Egyptian law. How can a self-professed religious state prohibit political activity with a “religious background”? When I posed this question to Hossam Badrawi, a leading member of a group of young politicians who profess to be reforming the N.D.P. from within, he asked me in return, “If I go to Germany and I want to start a Nazi Party, would I be allowed to do that?”

“Is that a fair analogy?”

“Yes, because they don't respect the constitution, which lays out a separate role for politics and religion.” Except that it doesn't or didn't, until just now.

This is the kind of language that, as Saad Eddin Ibrahim put it, is bound to scare foreigners and the middle class.

President Mubarak has called the group a threat to national security. Mohamed Kamal, a political scientist who is close to Gamal Mubarak, the president's son and heir apparent, and who now serves as the N.D.P.'s semiofficial spokesman to the Western media, says of the brotherhood: "They're fundamentalist in their ideology. I'm not saying necessarily that they're terrorists; they want to establish a religious state based on their interpretation of the Koran and the Shariah." While some of their leaders "pay lip service to democracy, women's rights and so on," Kamal says, the grass roots are deeply reactionary.

Is that so? One night I drove out to the far northeastern edge of Cairo — a trip that took an hour and a half through the city's insane traffic — to meet with Magdy Ashour, a member of the brotherhood's parliamentary bloc. The caucus is heavy with lawyers, doctors and professors, but Ashour is an electrician with a technical diploma. The neighborhood he represents, al-Nozha, is a squalid quarter of shattered buildings and dusty lanes. Ashour had established himself in what seemed to be the only substantial structure in the area, a half-completed apartment building; I walked through plaster dust and exposed wiring to reach his office. Ashour hurried in from the evening prayer. He was a solemn, square-jawed 41-year-old with short hair and unfashionable glasses, a brown suit and a brown tie. He grew up, he said, in the neighborhood, and as a young man often gave the Friday sermon at the local mosque. He joined the brotherhood when he was 23. Why? "From my reading and my earliest meetings with brotherhood members," he said through a translator, "I could see that they were moderate, that they don't impose their religion on people, but at the same time they're not loose with their religious principles."

I asked Ashour if the spate of arrests had him worried, and he said that he indeed feared that the state might be seeking an "open confrontation" with the brotherhood. Might not that provoke the group's supporters to violence? Ashour answered by citing an aphorism he attributed to the brotherhood's founder, Hassan al-Banna: "Be like trees among the people: They strike you with stones, and you shower them with blessings." Ashour then embarked on a brief oration: "We would like to change the idea people have of us in the West," he said, "because when people hear the name Muslim Brotherhood, they think of terrorism and suicide bombings. We want to establish the perception of an Islamic group cooperating with other groups, concerned about human rights. We do not want a country like Iran, which thinks that it is ruling with a divine mandate. We want a government based on civil law with an Islamic source of lawmaking." If Magdy Ashour was a theocrat — or a terrorist — he was a very crafty one.

As it has fully entered the political arena, the brotherhood has been forced to come up with clear answers on issues about which it has been notably ambiguous in the past. Some are easy enough: There seems to be little appetite among them for stoning adulterers or lopping off the hands of thieves; and all deprecate the jizya, or tax on nonbelievers, as a relic of an era when only Muslims served in the military. Some are not so easy. I asked Magdy Ashour about the drinking of alcohol, which is prohibited in Saudi Arabia, Iran and other Islamic states. He was quite unfazed. "There is a concept in Shariah that if you commit the sin in private it's different from committing it in public," he explained. You can drink in a hotel, but not in the street. This was flexibility verging on pragmatism. I wondered if Ashour, and the other brotherhood candidates, had offered such nuanced judgments on the stump; a number of detractors insist that the group's campaign rhetoric was much more unabashedly Islamist.

There are, of course, more fundamental questions. In the course of a three-hour conversation in the brotherhood's extremely modest office in an apartment building in one of Cairo's residential neighborhoods, I asked Muhammad Habib, the deputy supreme guide, how the brotherhood would react if the Legislature passed a law that violated Shariah. "The People's Assembly has the absolute right in that situation," he said, "as long as it is elected in a free and fair election which manifests the people's will. The Parliament could go to religious scholars and hear their opinion" — as it could seek the advice of economists on economic matters — "but it is not obliged to listen to these opinions." Some consider grave moral issues, like homosexual marriage, beyond the pale of majoritarianism; others make no such exception. Hassan al-Banna famously wrote that people are the source of authority. This can be understood, if you wish to, as the Islamic version of the democratic credo.

The acceptance of democracy is itself a proxy for something else — the repudiation of violence and terrorism. Here the brotherhood has a fair amount of history to answer for. The organization was established in 1928 in the wake of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's secularization of Turkey and his abolition of the caliphate, the line of religious rulers that stretched back to the Prophet Muhammad. Hassan al-Banna, the charismatic founder, aspired to revitalize the spirit of Islam among the umma, the worldwide body of believers, and ultimately to restore the caliphate and Shariah. But for all al-Banna's emphasis on peaceful evangelizing, he also created a paramilitary wing, like Mussolini's brown shirts, known as al-nizam al-khas — the Special Apparatus. During the '40s, when Egyptians fought to free themselves from British rule, brotherhood operatives engaged in a campaign of bombings and assassinations. The organization was banned in 1948; soon afterward, a member of the group assassinated Egypt's prime minister. Al-Banna denounced the deed, but he was himself murdered by government security forces. And when a brotherhood plot to assassinate Gamal Abdel Nasser miscarried, most of the leading figures were jailed and tortured.

In 1964, the most prominent of the jailed leaders, Sayyid Qutb, produced a tract, "Milestones," which magnified the militant side of the brotherhood and rejected al-Banna's faith in the merits of instruction and moral example. Islamic regimes that failed to establish Shariah were apostates, he declared no better than the infidels themselves. Egypt was, of course, just such a state. "Milestones" was read as a call to revolution. Qutb was sentenced to death and hanged in 1966, making him a martyr throughout the Middle East. Among his disciples were the radical , now Al Qaeda's second in [Ayman al-Zawahiri](#) Islamists who conspired to murder Sadat in 1981 including was deeply influenced by Qutb's works and regularly attended lectures given by Qutb's [Osama bin Laden](#) command. younger brother, Muhammad. "Milestones" is now considered the founding manifesto of jihadism.

Qutb remains a heroic figure for many Egyptians. But Ibrahim Hedaybi, the young activist who sent me the text message about the arrest, pointed out to me when we met the next day that his own grandfather, Hasan Hedaybi, who replaced al-Banna as supreme guide and was jailed along with Qutb, wrote a book from prison, "Preachers, Not Judges," designed to reassert the brotherhood's commitment to peace and to open debate. Hedaybi was a thoroughly modern figure; we met in a coffee shop near the American University in Cairo, where he recently received his master's in political science. He was now working as a business consultant. Hedaybi wanted to see the brotherhood deal explicitly with the legacy of Qutb, even if doing so might not play well in the hustings. Other, more senior figures I spoke to insisted rather implausibly that Qutb had been misunderstood; but all swore by the

philosophy of tolerance and the program of gradual reform laid out in “Preachers, Not Judges.”

The brotherhood is an international organization. It has, however, no Comintern, no central apparatus. In Sudan, brotherhood members have formed an alliance with a deeply authoritarian ruling party. The brotherhood in Jordan and Morocco is considered relatively moderate. But in the Palestinian territories, the organization mutated . Policy makers and academics in the West tend to be more concerned with the brotherhood’s views of [Hamasi](#) into Hamas than with its understanding of Shariah. And here there is little satisfaction to be had. When I asked Muhammad Habib about Hamas attacks on Israeli civilians, he said, “With the continuous crackdown and ongoing war launched by the Israeli Army, which does not distinguish between civilians and noncivilians, you cannot speak about the Palestinians disregarding Israeli citizens.” Brotherhood figures do not, at bottom, accept Israel’s right to exist. Seif al-Islam, the son of Hassan al-Banna and a venerated elder of the group, said to me, in his stylized version of English: “Not any Palestine man or Egypt man feels that Jews who come from the outside have the right to stay in Palestine. At the same time, the Palestinian people on the outside cannot have a grave to bury in. This is not religion.”

The more worldly among the brotherhood’s legislators and thinkers understand that Israel is a test just as Qutb is a test, and that the Western audience matters even if it doesn’t vote. Hazem Farouk Mansour, a dentist who is the head of the foreign-policy committee of the parliamentary bloc, says of Camp David, “We accept it as an agreement, whether we like it or not.” Essam el-Erian, a clinical pathologist who is head of the brotherhood’s political committee and perhaps its most sophisticated thinker, said to me: “Look, this is a historical and ideological and religious crisis. It cannot be solved in a few years. Every part in this conflict can be put forth for dialogue.” Like virtually all of his colleagues, el-Erian urged me not to get too hung up on this or any other question of what the brotherhood might do in some unimaginably remote future in which the regime had somehow relinquished its grip on power. “We can solve the problem of our society,” he said, “to have democratic reform respected by Europeans and Americans, whatever happens to the Palestinians.”

From what I could tell, in fact, the brotherhood in its public oratory sticks to issues of political process, while voters worry about the kind of mundane issues that preoccupy people everywhere. Magdy Ashour said that few voters knew or cared anything about issues like constitutional reform. He agreed to let me sit by his side one evening as he met with constituents. None of the dozen or so petitioners who were ushered into the tiny, bare cell of his office asked about the political situation, and none had any complaints about cultural or moral issues. Rather, there were heart-rending stories of abuse by the powerful, like the profoundly palsied young man confined to a wheelchair who sold odds and ends from a kiosk under a bridge, and who was ejected, along with his meager goods, when a road-improvement project came through. (Ashour promised to go with him to the police station the following morning.) Mostly, though, people wanted help getting a job. One ancient gentleman with a white turban and walking stick wandered in as if from the Old Testament. He was accompanied by his daughter and 3-year-old granddaughter. His daughter’s husband had abandoned her, and she needed a job. Ashour explained that since the woman had a business degree, she might find work in a private school.

The old man shook his head. “She must have a government job,” he said. “She has three girls. I am too old to take care of her. She needs security.” Ashour later explained to me that while a private job might pay \$90 a month and a public one only \$35, the government job would carry a guaranteed \$15 pension, which felt like insurance against destitution. Only a government job was considered real; Ashour himself had worked as the superintendent for lighting infrastructure for a portion of Cairo. Nasser caught the bug of socialism half a century earlier, and the government continued to dominate the economy and to sap the energies needed for private initiative. Egypt’s arthritic economy and its deeply corrupt public administration were much more salient problems for Ashour than was, say, debauchery on TV.

arrived in Cairo in the middle of a heated national debate over Mubarak’s proposed reform of the constitution. During the presidential campaign, Mubarak promised to reduce his own powers in favor of the Legislature and the cabinet and to loosen restrictions on political parties. Only trace elements of those vows remained; in fact, the reforms seemed designed to consolidate, rather than dissipate, the regime’s authority. Article 88, which had stipulated that elections be held “under the supervision of members of the judiciary authority,” now granted that control to “a higher commission marked by independence and impartiality.” Since no such bodies had been known to exist in Egypt, few figures outside the ruling party were willing to take the proposal at face value. And a new anti-terrorism provision allowed the state to set aside civil liberties enumerated elsewhere in the constitution in the pursuit of suspected terrorists. Mohamed Kamal described this measure to me as the equivalent of the USA Patriot Act, but political activists are convinced that it will be used to snuff out opposition. (The brotherhood may be the described the package as [Amnesty International](#) chief target, since the regime regards it as a quasi-terrorist body.) the gravest threat to human rights in Egypt since Mubarak took power.

In mid-March, on the day the proposed amendments were presented to the People’s Assembly, the brotherhood legislators and the dozen or so members of the secular opposition staged a joint protest. The entire group stood silently inside the gates of Parliament wearing black sashes that read, “No to the Constitutional Amendments,” and carrying signs that read, “No to Electoral Fraud,” “No to Dawn Visitors” and so on. The muezzin’s call led to an interval of prayer, and then legislators squeezed one by one through the gates, backing the scrum of reporters and photographers into a busy two-way street. Drivers honked furiously while legislators struggled to be heard over the din. I had the impression that the brotherhood hadn’t yet gotten the hang of press relations.

The entire opposition boycotted the debate; the regime, unimpressed, carried the day with the near-unanimous support of the N.D.P. and then scheduled the mandatory national referendum for the following week, presumably to prevent the opposition from mobilizing. But the tactic failed; opposition legislators urged supporters to boycott the ballot. All of the brotherhood legislators I spoke to that day said that the polling places in their constituency were literally empty. Civic groups canvassing Cairo and other major cities came to the same conclusion. Estimates of turnout varied from 2 to 8 percent. When it was over, government officials pegged turnout at 27 percent — a figure so improbable that it scarcely seemed intended to be believed. Perhaps the implicit message was that the regime didn’t care if it was believed or not.



delivered a landmark address at the American University in Cairo [Condoleezza Rice](#) In June 2005, Secretary of State in which she bluntly declared, “The day must come when the rule of law replaces emergency decrees and when the independent judiciary replaces arbitrary justice.” Egypt’s democracy activists were enthralled — though they were to become increasingly disappointed, and then embittered, as the administration offered no public response to Mubarak’s crackdown. But Rice’s call to the political barricades was carefully modulated, perhaps in order to limit the offense to the regime. Asked after the speech about the Muslim Brotherhood, Rice said flatly, “We have not engaged the Muslim Brotherhood and . . . we won’t.” In fact, American diplomats had been in regular contact with brotherhood officials over the years; Rice was declaring — in fact, making — a new policy. And that policy still largely obtains. Rice’s spokesman, Sean McCormack, told me, “We do not meet with the Muslim Brotherhood per se, as we don’t want to get entangled in complexities surrounding its legality as a political party.” He added, however, “Consistent with our practice elsewhere, we will nonetheless meet with any duly elected member of the parliamentary opposition.” In fact, American officials in Cairo included leading brotherhood parliamentarians in a , the Democratic majority leader of the House. [Steny Hoyer](#) group of legislators who met recently with Representative

But why not engage the brotherhood openly? Is what is gained by mollifying the Mubarak regime worth what is lost by forgoing contact with the brotherhood? “Americans,” Essam el-Erian said to me, “must have channels with all the people, not only in politics, but in economics, in social, in everything, if they want to change the image of America in the region.” Of course, that principle applies only up to a point. The administration has, in Lebanon. But the [Hezbollah](#) understandably, refused to recognize the democratic bona fides either of Hamas or of Muslim Brotherhood, for all its rhetorical support of Hamas, could well be precisely the kind of moderate Islamic body that the administration says it seeks. And as with Islamist parties in Turkey and Morocco, the experience of practical politics has made the brotherhood more pragmatic, less doctrinaire. Finally, foreign policy is no longer a rarefied game of elites: public opinion shapes the world within which policy makers operate, and the refusal to deal with Hamas or Hezbollah has made publics in the Islamic world dismiss the whole idea of democracy promotion. Even a wary acceptance of the brotherhood, by contrast, would demonstrate that we take seriously the democratic preferences of Arab voters.

In general, I found the brothers deeply suspicious of American designs in the world but also curious about America itself. When I took my leave of Magdy Ashour once the crowd of petitioners thinned out, he asked if he could pose some questions of his own. “I’ve heard,” he said, “that even George Bush’s mother thinks he’s an idiot; is that true?” And, “Why did George Bush say that America is going on a Christian crusade against the Muslim people?” And finally, “Is it true that the Jews control and manipulate the U.S. economy?” These are, alas, the kinds of questions — with the possible exception of the first — that people all over the Middle East ask.

Then Ashour said that he was thinking about visiting America. I asked how he could afford such an expensive journey, and he explained that the brotherhood has offered each legislator one free trip anywhere in the world — a remarkable program for an organization said to be bent on returning Egypt to the Middle Ages. “I would,” Ashour said, “like to see for myself.”



James Traub is a contributing writer for the magazine. He is working on a book about democracy promotion.