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From: Julie McGregor
AINAG
Date: 17 January 2006
cc: [REDACTED]

To:	Nick Banner (seen 17/01/06)	
	Dr Howells	
	Foreign Secretary	

EGYPT: CONTACTS WITH THE MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD

ISSUE

1. Whether to increase engagement with the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood.

TIMING

2. Priority. Egyptian parliamentary elections took place in November and December. We are likely to be asked by interlocutors, parliamentarians and the press how we plan to engage with the Muslim Brotherhood now that they have an increased presence in the People's Assembly.

PREFERRED OPTIONS

3. I recommend that we:
 - increase the frequency of working-level contacts with Muslim Brotherhood parliamentarians (who do not advocate violence), particularly those who are members of parliamentary committees;
 - change the content of our dialogue to focus on communicating our policy, as well as being in listening mode;
 - encourage other countries to adopt a similar policy of engagement, including the EU and US

AGREED BY

4. AINAG, EIWG and Cairo. Press Office and PRDT also agree.

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RISKS

5. The presentation of any change in the way we deal with the Muslim Brotherhood will have to be carefully handled, in order to safeguard our bilateral relations with Egypt. The Egyptian Government perceive the Muslim Brotherhood to be the political face of a terrorist organisation. In 2005, Research Analysts examined the alleged links between the Muslim Brotherhood and terrorism (Flag A). They concluded that there is no evidence of the current organisation being involved in terrorist activities, although it is possible that they forward charitable donations to Hamas.

6. We have already started preparing the ground with the Egyptians highlighting that we do not plan to support the MB but the results of the recent elections make it difficult for us not to engage with them. So far the Egyptians seem to understand the need for us to look at this issue but have made clear that they do not want any surprises in our policy. There will be no change to their own approach to the MB and no readiness to allow them to form a political party.

ARGUMENT

7. In the 2005 Egyptian parliamentary elections, the independent candidates affiliated to the Muslim Brotherhood won 88 (20%) seats, an increase of 71 seats from the 2000 elections, making it the strongest opposition group in Egypt. As the MB now has a strong representation in the People's Assembly and is clearly a political force in Egypt it is no longer possible for us to maintain a policy of minimal contact. It will also be difficult for us to maintain credibility for our calls on Egypt to reform towards further democracy and better governance, if we fail to engage with the largest and most effective opposition group.

8. Engaging with movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood will help increase our understanding of 'political Islam' generally, as well as in the specific Egyptian context. Incremental enhancement of contacts may help in discouraging radicalisation. Interacting with 'political Islam' is an important element of our Engaging with the Islamic World strategy and we should be trying to influence these groups, who often have significant reach with the 'grass roots'. It also gives us the opportunity to challenge their perception of the West, including of the UK, and on their prescriptions for solving the challenges facing Egypt and the region.

9. The US are reviewing their position on contacts with the MB, having previously refused any contact. Their line is likely to continue to be that they will operate within Egyptian law. We should discuss increased political contacts with the US and EU partners sharing our ideas for ways to increase contacts, sensitively and gradually. In particular we should consider including appropriate MB parliamentarians in Muslim outreach and interfaith initiatives and including MB parliamentarians amongst other parliamentarians and civil society representatives when events for medium-level British visitors take place in Egypt.

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BACKGROUND

10. Until 2002, FCO officials have had infrequent working-level (Second Secretary) contact with Muslim Brotherhood members of parliament. However this was noticed by the Egyptian authorities who made clear their displeasure. Since 2002 we have had only occasional contacts with MB members including one or two contacts with parliamentarians and random unplanned encounters.

11. Religious groups are banned from forming political parties in Egypt. As the MB is not recognised as a political party it puts forward independent candidates to compete in elections. However the Egyptian authorities adopted a more relaxed policy in the recent elections, giving the MB more freedom to operate and campaign. For the first time MB candidates were allowed to campaign with a common platform and their use of the banned slogan "Islam is the Solution" was tolerated. Nevertheless, several hundred MB supporters were arrested during the latter stages of the parliamentary elections. In spite of the subsequent efforts of the ruling elite to limit MB successes, it is clear that the new parliamentary situation derives from the government's readiness to allow the MB more rope. They are most unlikely, however, to change their position that the MB remains banned as a political organisation on the basis of 'no religion in politics'.

PARLIAMENT AND MEDIA

12. There has been recent press and parliamentary interest in the FCO's views on political Islamists, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood. Any policy of engagement is likely to come under further scrutiny. I attach draft press lines (Flag B).

RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

13. None.

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DRAFT PRESS LINES

- recent parliamentary elections in Egypt raised the number of Muslim Brotherhood representatives in the People's Assembly to 88. Premature to form a view of likely impact on work of the Egyptian parliament
- while the Muslim Brotherhood is not recognised as a legal organisation in Egypt, the increase in the number of independent members of the People's Assembly linked to the Muslim Brotherhood means that international contacts with them, including on the part of the UK, will inevitably increase
- contact with elected parliamentarians, who use peaceful means to achieve their objectives, is normal diplomatic practice
- [if pressed] we have seen no credible evidence linking the Muslim Brotherhood to terrorist activities