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Why U.S Technology Leads the World

Not On My Dime: Raging Against Tax Rates

Liberals and Conservatives At Opposite Ends

despite recent budget agreements between Democrats and Republicans, and the strong consensus that federal deficits need to be kept under control, there remains bitter debate over whether this should be done partially through higher taxes.

Republicans resist tax increases, insisting that the only solution is to further decrease government spending. Democrats say that in addition to spending cuts, deficits should continue to be reduced by ending all tax loopholes used by corporations and by increasing taxes on the rich.

If the government is to provide services—keeping the country safe, building and repairing highways, rescuing victims of natural disasters—the money has to come from somewhere. The problem is that the government is still spending more money than it is collecting in taxes and so it has to borrow trillions of dollars to pay for these services.

The government borrows money by issuing a U.S. Treasury Bond, which is essentially a promissory note to pay back the loan with interest by a certain date. If America's deficits climb too high, bondholders may start worrying that they might not get paid back. Others could grow wary of buying more. The government would then have to entice bond purchasers by offering them higher interest rates to compensate for the increased risk.

Doug Elmendorf, director of the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office, predicted that if the interest rate on U.S. Treasury Bonds rose by a mere 0.1% over the next decade, it would cost the government an extra \$130 billion.

Here's the vicious cycle: more debt drives up interest rates, which requires more loans to pay the additional interest, which further increases the interest rate—and the cycle continues until the country goes bankrupt. Plus, with all that extra money being spent on higher interest, there's less leftover to pay for other programs like defense, education, and healthcare. So most everyone agrees that we must keep future deficits from spiraling out of control.

what's a reasonable tax?

The U.S. relies heavily on a progressive income tax to pay for government services. Those who make more money are taxed at a higher rate. A major source of wealth for the rich is investment income. Progressive tax advocates believe that middle class families who earn money from their labor should not have to pay as much taxes as those who reap profits by investing in stocks, bonds, real

estate, etc. They also note that those who work for a middle class wage barely earn enough money to sustain themselves, let alone invest. And these are the families who suffer the most from cuts in government services, such as Medicare, Social Security, and public education.

Yet the debate rages: How much should we be taxing the rich, and how high should taxes be for everyone else? What's fair, what works?

Q1: Should tax rates be higher for the wealthy, or the same for everyone? Explain your answer.

low taxes, more jobs?

President Ronald Reagan rode to victory in 1980 touting the ideology that high taxes for the rich hurts the entire economy—which includes the middle class—because those with wealth are the ones most likely to invest in companies that keep people employed.

Reagan lowered taxes across the board, dropping the top marginal rate from nearly 70% to about 50%. Yet at the same time he increased military spending to fight the Cold War, and most government social programs such as Medicare and Social Security remained intact. The economy grew, but so did the federal deficit. It turns out, not surprisingly, that people like paying less in taxes but they also like receiving government services.

So despite his general embrace of low taxes, Reagan eventually increased them in order to keep the deficits from climbing further. "He raised taxes 11 times," former Senator Alan Simpson reminds his fellow Republicans, adding that "he was a dear friend and a total realist." Though Simpson still shares Reagan's embrace of low taxes, he believes that budget deficits cannot be further slashed solely by slashing government expenditures.

David Stockman, Reagan's Budget Director and ardent champion of his low-tax ideology, explains why he too agrees with Reagan's later shift on taxes: "He wasn't very happy about it. He did it reluctantly. But at the end of the day, the math was overwhelming."

Still, those tax hikes remain a sore-spot for many of Reagan's most loyal admirers. One of them is Grover Norquist, the powerful head of the Americans for Tax Reform lobbying group. He continues to insist that elected officials and office seekers sign a pledge to "oppose any and all efforts to increase the marginal income tax rates for individuals and/or businesses."

Pat Buchanan is another Reagan loyalist, having served as his White House Communications Director. But when asked about his former



boss's decision to generate \$190 billion more in revenues by raising taxes, the conservative Republican's reply shocked his liberal interviewer. "Shouldn't you do just like Reagan and put revenue increases into the deficit reduction deals?" Buchanan was asked. "No," he said flatly. He agrees with Norquist, who still insists: "We're spending too much, not taxing too little."

high taxes, more jobs?

Many Democrats say that more government spending is actually a plus. It creates more jobs. When the government raises taxes to construct a high-speed train route, the additional hiring increases the purchasing power of these new employees, creating more customers for businesses, who in turn hire more people to serve them. And these new job holders generate more revenue for the government since they have more income that can be taxed.

Most Republicans disagree. Whenever possible, they say, business executives should decide which projects are worth funding. Some say that even the roads should be privatized, with expenses paid by tolls. "With private operators responsible for maintenance as well as improvement of the highways, gasoline taxes and other government charges for roads could be phased out," writes the conservative columnist, Peter Samuel. "Privatization of the highways should be attractive to elected officials needing to make good on promises of reducing budget deficits and lowering taxes."

Can the Democratic belief in liberal government spending and higher taxes be reconciled with the Republican devotion to lower taxes and limited conservative government?

"I'm confident that the Democrats and Republicans in Congress can find a way to give some ground," President Obama has said. Senator Tom Coburn, a prominent conservative Republican, agrees: "Any American who truly understands this problem knows that we're going to have to come together and solve it, and we can't have it all our own way."

When it comes to taxes, for some, compromise equals fairness, but to others it means surrender.

Q2: What is your view of the tax debate?

The Arab Student Revolt: Freedom!

A new generation demands democracy

as the uprisings known as the Arab Spring continue to influence the entire Middle East, with their outcomes uncertain, one thing is sure: young people throughout the region have discovered they have the power to challenge their authoritarian rulers and in some cases to force them to accept democratic political change.

For decades, the Middle East has been regarded as a politically stagnant region in the world, economically backward, ruled by despotic leaders, and associated in the Western mind with terrorism. It seemed to many that democracy and human rights, values cherished in the West, simply could not take hold in the Arab world.

The Arab Spring has changed all that. It began in Tunisia this year and swept across the region during the course of a few short months. Egypt, Morocco, Algeria, Jordan, Syria, Bahrain, Yemen, and Libya have all been affected by the turmoil.

In Tunisia, people were so frustrated by long-standing poverty and government corruption that they took to the streets in protest. The spark that brought the people out was the suicide of a young unemployed man. He had tried to make a living selling vegetables but public officials kept putting obstacles in his way. He died after setting himself on fire in a grizzly, desperate protest. The public reaction against his plight was so fierce that Tunisia's president resigned and fled the county.

Emboldened by the sudden toppling of dictatorial rule in Tunisia, Arab students took to the streets in nearby Egypt. President Hosni Mubarak, who had been in power for 30 years, was forced to step down after weeks of protests that brought together a coalition of professionals, merchants, clergy, students, and others representing a wide cross-section of the population. Over 800 people were killed during the unrest as government forces tried to disperse the nonviolent demonstrators.

The next Arab state to get caught up in the spreading demands for democracy was Syria, which for three decades had been ruled with an iron fist by one man, Hafez al-Assad. Following his death in 2000, the dictatorship was passed on to his son, Bashar al-Assad.

Syria's youth took to the streets to plea for democratic reform. Bashar al-Assad's regime responded with tanks and troops, attacking residential areas, killing hundreds of unarmed protesters, much the way his father had crushed an uprising 35 years earlier, though the elder Assad had been even more ruthless, having slaughtered over 20,000 people in one city alone.

Protests also spread to Yemen and Bahrain, prompting similar repression. Civil war broke out in Libya, where U.S. forces joined its NATO allies in support of the rebels.

student leaders

During the Arab Spring, it was young people who led the way, demonstrating their commitment to nonviolent change, democracy, and human rights. Whereas the older generation was at first too fearful to confront their despotic leaders, the young, fueled by anger over poverty and unemployment, took their courage in their hands and demanded change.

To organize the protests, student activists used social media like Facebook and Twitter, which also helped them to develop their ideas and form a sense of solidarity with one another. Once the protests were underway, they used these same social media to post updates on what was happening, including video, so the world would know what was happening.

Repressive governments thrive on secrecy and the suppression of information, but these young Arab people used their hi-tech savvy to frustrate the authorities. They knew they were part of a great nonviolent movement for change.

For years they had been learning through the Internet of what life was like in more prosperous nations, and they were impatient with the closed societies in which they lived. By acting on their highest ideals for themselves and their countries, they gained a sense of empowerment that Arabs living in repressive societies had not known for decades.

In Bahrain, for example, a 24-year-old activist formed the Bahrain Youth Society for Human Rights, and the young people's movement in that country soon posed one of the most serious threats to the ruling family since it first took power in the eighteenth century.

Q1: What can young people in America learn from their counterparts in the Middle East?

explosive "youth bulge"

Given the demographics of the Middle East, it is no surprise that young people took the lead in the Arab Spring. The region has one of the youngest populations in the world. In Yemen, over 75 percent of the population is under the age of 25. In Syria, it's 55 percent; Egypt, 50 percent; Libya, 47 percent; Bahrain, 44 percent; Tunisia, 42 percent. These figures con-



trast sharply with U.S. and European statistics, with only 35 percent of the U.S. population under the age of 25. In the United Kingdom it's 27 percent, and in Germany it is 22 percent.

Having a preponderance of young people in society, what analysts call a "youth bulge," is not sufficient in itself to create turmoil. Many nations in parts of Asia have experienced a youth bulge but because of their productive economies and efficient education systems it has been an opportunity for fast economic growth rather than unrest. It is different in the Middle East because of high unemployment rates, especially among the young.

For example, the youth unemployment rate in Egypt is 43 percent. In Tunisia, the figure is 30 percent. In Syria, it is 24 percent. This means that there are millions of young people in the Arab world who are desperately frustrated with their lives. They cannot use their skills to make their way in the world or fulfill their ambitions. College graduates sit idle; many youngsters remain mired in poverty, unable to find work. Naturally enough, they eventually turn their energies to social protest.

The volatile recipe for the Arab Spring uprisings was therefore: repressive society + youth bulge + high unemployment.

Some Arab regimes are beginning to realize that they must democratize and give the young generation a voice to unleash its creativity.

This is not going to be an easy transition, and it will have implications for the West. Unrest in the Middle East often causes gasoline prices to skyrocket. It also triggers concerns for the security of Israel, the key U.S. ally in the region, and unease over Iraq, where there's a strategic interest in keeping that Arab nation from falling under the sway of Islamist terrorists and the anti-American policies of neighboring Iran.

For the moment, while invigorated by the dramatic changes that have swept across the Middle East, the promise of democracy remains uncertain. There are worries that the optimistic Arab Spring may yet turn into another long and authoritarian Arab Winter.

Q2: Should the West provide economic aid to Arab democracy advocates or should they be left to work for reforms on their own? Explain.

U.S. Hi-Tech Still the Global Leader

Despite Recession, U.S. Companies Thrive

apple, Google, Facebook, Microsoft, eBay, YouTube, Yahoo—and many of the world’s other top hi-tech companies—are in the U.S. Why?

And why, despite the recession and foreign competition that has hurt so many other industries, has the hi-tech sector of the U.S. economy stayed so strong?

It’s no accident, says Thomas Mason, Emeritus Professor of Economics and Engineering Management at Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology, which is recognized as a top school for undergraduate engineering.

“The U.S. remains preeminent because we still have the best innovation culture,” Mason explains. That innovation culture is key, and includes everything from venture capital to tax breaks to federal spending on education.

Take, for example, Google. The giant search engine, which now has over 1 billion unique visitors per month, began in 1996 as a research project by two graduate students, Larry Page and Sergey Brin. While attending Stanford University, they devised a better idea for how a search engine could work. It quickly became popular and in 1998 the cofounder of Sun Microsystems gave them \$100,000 in venture capital to fund further development.

The next year they received \$25 million from various venture capital firms, and in 2004 the company had its initial public stock offering, raising \$1.67 billion from Wall St. Today their total assets are nearly \$60 billion.

Consider, first of all, how easy it is to start a company in the U.S. Page and Brin were students at the time, not businessmen or entrepreneurs. They had an idea and ran with it. Initially, Google was even hosted on Stanford University’s computer network servers.

Mason notes that this ease of starting up a company—two graduate students with an idea for a better search engine—just doesn’t exist in many other countries. In Europe, for example, a range of permits are required to start a business. In the U.S., no permit is needed. And in some developing countries, not only does one need permits, but they are difficult to get and often require paying bribes to government officials.

venture capital

In addition, Google—and most other hi-tech ventures—function largely outside of the U.S. banking system. Many sectors of the economy depend on bank loans to fund things such as new facilities. Yet banks are cautious, as they

should be, especially after the recent financial crisis. Bank loan officers want to be assured that they’ll be paid back.

Venture capitalists, on the other hand, are typically individuals with a lot of money who are eager to gamble on the most promising ventures. They recognize that many of the ventures they fund won’t succeed, and they won’t see a dime. But on the other hand, if they happen to fund a company that becomes the next Google, they’ll strike it rich.

When these companies do succeed, they wind up having a lot of cash on hand to fund their own further expansion so there’s little need for them to borrow from banks.

If the venture capital investors choose not to use all their newfound profits to fund further expansion of their companies, the federal government uses the lure of tax breaks to entice them into putting some of their earnings right back into other hi-tech start-ups, thus expanding the pool of venture capital funding available for yet another crop of young, eager, and innovative entrepreneurs.

And these tax breaks are alluring: Corporate profits are taxed at regular rates but venture capitalists who invest in new enterprises get to pay much lower taxes on their earnings.

“Venture capitalists can invest in new ventures that gain value as the technology is implemented,” Mason explains. “When they harvest this value by selling their ownership interests in the companies, the gains in value are generally taxed at the long term capital gains rate of 15%.”

Don’t other countries have venture capitalists? In some, such as China, the government plays that role. But, as Mason explains, China’s leaders tend to protect the status quo, more influenced by politics than business, which often keeps conservative decisionmakers from throwing needed money at what may seem like risky new ventures.

This cautious approach may be prudent in politics, but when it comes to innovative hi-tech ventures, such risk averse behavior can be a significant roadblock to success.

In many other countries, venture capitalists are starting to appear, but they don’t have as much money to pass around, nor the expertise. In the U.S., many venture capitalists are themselves former entrepreneurs, such as Marc Andreessen, co-developer of the first graphical web browser. They have expertise, a pile of



money, and are eager to support new ventures. **Q1: Can the U.S. retain its competitive advantage in the hi-tech business sector? Explain.**

a culture of creativity

Another key factor in the success of the hi-tech industry is a culture that accommodates creativity and celebrates diversity. Walk into Google and you may see top engineers with spiky hair, jeans, tattoos, and piercings.

Research by Richard Florida has shown that centers of creativity, such as Silicon Valley, Boston, Seattle, and Austin, consciously attract a creative class of highly talented individuals who often move to these areas precisely because they can be themselves. Google even has their employees take one day a week away from their regular jobs to develop whatever pet projects that interest them. Essentially they are saying, be yourself, see where your interests take you. Many of Google’s current services began as these innovative pet projects.

America’s innovation culture has long been responsible for the country’s prosperity. It has attracted many of the best and brightest from around the world. Co-founders of many of the top companies, such as Apple, Google, Yahoo, eBay, and others, were either immigrants or the children of immigrants.

The U.S. simply has a great entrepreneurial spirit, and the federal government consciously fosters it. Washington funds research at private universities such as Stanford, channels money to private firms through the Small Business Administration, and gives tax breaks to private companies for research and development.

These policies support a positive disruption of the status quo, encouraging pioneering competition, reflecting the successful U.S. free enterprise model that uses government to strengthen, and not replace, the private sector.

The historical results are evident, and the future is promising if America’s culture of innovation can continue to endure.

Q2: Do most American teachers and students work together to help create a robust innovative culture in the U.S. classroom? Explain.

Labor Union Boosters and Busters

At stake: wages, budgets, deficits, & job security

as cash-strapped U.S. states struggle to balance their budgets in an economy marked by soaring deficits and high unemployment, some are turning the spotlight on public employee unions and the salaries they offer to their members.

Public employees are those employed by the government at federal, state, or local levels, such as teachers, firefighters, police officers, postal workers, among others.

In Wisconsin and Ohio, both Republican-controlled states, legislation has been passed that severely restricts the right of public employee unions to engage in collective bargaining. The unions and their Democratic allies have reacted furiously to this move.

Collective bargaining means that the union negotiates with the employer on behalf of all its members. Because the workers are able to negotiate as a single group, they are in a more powerful position than if they were just a collection of individuals.

The right to collective bargaining is protected by the National Labor Relations Act. If workers vote to stage a protest to improve conditions or strike in support of better wages, their employers are prevented from firing them, cutting salaries, or otherwise retaliating against them. It just covers private sector workers, and only 24 states allow all of their government workers to bargain collectively.

government workers

Those who are now calling for increased restrictions on public employee unions claim that public officials urgently need the flexibility to trim salaries, cut staff, and reduce retirement benefits, all of which might not ordinarily be possible if they had to negotiate such drastic measures in the face of an organized labor force armed with collective bargaining rights.

Collective bargaining for public employees is especially problematic, they contend, because unlike private corporations, government workers actually elect the very people who later become or remain their managers. For instance, a local police officer gets to vote for the mayor and city commissioners who decide salary levels for the entire police force. Hence, a well organized police union can simply back those candidates for office who are more likely to consent to their salary demands during subsequent collective bargaining negotiations.

“At all levels of government today, public-worker unions are among the biggest political donors,” writes conservative analyst Yuval

Levin. “Between elections, they can use that political power to influence those elected officials and the political process more generally to improve their pay, benefits, or conditions, and also to increase demand for their services through legislation that increases the size or role of government.”

In response, union advocates observe that there are business lobbyists who donate to candidates that later decide on policies that cater to the demands of wealthy corporations. This creates situations where officials divert funds from public education into tax subsidies for private companies. They say that collective bargaining for public employees just helps even the playing field, ensuring that middle class workers can also get a say in how government funds are being spent instead of just leaving the discussion to the outside influences of corporate lobbyists and special interests.

“The unfortunate fact,” writes Harry Kelber, is that labor organizers “are no match for high-priced corporate lobbyists in terms of numbers, resources and power.” The veteran union activist notes that “they represent the nation’s strongest and wealthiest corporations in oil, banking, real estate, military contracting, telecommunications, transportation and a host of other industries,” insisting that “corporate lobbyists have a lot more to offer lawmakers to win their vote for a particular bill than do labor lobbyists.”

Q1: Who’s stronger: corporations or unions?

job killers or saviours?

The first labor unions were formed in the nineteenth century, when there were few regulations concerning wages and working conditions. Such milestones as the establishment of a minimum wage, the right to overtime pay, and restrictions on child labor, were in part due to union activism over many years.

Union membership reached a peak around 1970. In 1990, the figure had dropped to 16.4 percent. Today, 12.4 percent of the workforce is unionized. In the private sector, the figure is even lower, just 7.6 percent. But among public employees, union membership has actually grown over the last few decades. Today, 36.8 percent of public employees, amounting to 8.4 million people, are members of a union.

The drop in private sector union membership is due to many factors, including a decline in U.S. manufacturing industries such as auto, steel, and heavy equipment, which traditionally



have high blue-collar union membership.

Low-paid service sector employees, like those who work in the fast-food industries or giant retailers such as Wal-Mart, lack the clout and organizing skills needed to build a powerful union presence. The more highly skilled, middle class workers who make up the bulk of the public employee unions—firefighters, police officers, public school teachers—are better situated to press their interests through organized labor unions.

Historically, liberals have championed labor unions, touting their ability to create and sustain well-paying jobs. Most conservatives see them as a threat to the free market, making it more difficult for companies to hire new workers.

Governor Scott Walker has become both a celebrated and loathed symbol of the battle over public employee unions, having recently managed to end most collective bargaining by public workers in Wisconsin, which in 1959 had become the very first state in the nation to grant such rights to government employees.

“What changes is the fact that no longer can our unions have a stranglehold” on state and local governments, Walker said when defending his actions. By defying the unions, he stated, they will no longer be able to stop alterations in “benefit packages that are like a virus eating up our budget.”

Liberal columnist Ezra Klein disagrees with Walker’s underlying premise. “Public-employee pensions aren’t a major cause of state budget woes,” he wrote. “Public-sector workers aren’t overpaid relative to similarly educated private workers.” A fellow liberal, economist Paul Krugman, continued the case against Walker and his conservative supporters: “The notion that putting more kids through college can restore the middle-class society we used to have is wishful thinking,” Krugman cautioned. “We need to restore the bargaining power that labor has lost over the last 30 years, so that ordinary workers as well as superstars have the power to bargain for good wages.”

The argument is not likely to be over soon as more state legislators push against public unions while organized labor tries to hold the line.

Q2: Should public school teachers have the right to strike for increased salaries?

Muslim Brotherhood: Partner or Threat?

Arab democratic reforms strengthen their role

With the Arab world continuing to experience widespread social unrest, Western observers are closely watching the activities of a group called the Muslim Brotherhood.

The Brotherhood wields great influence in many parts of the Arab world, especially Egypt, and has traditionally been an enemy of the West. The current turmoil presents the Brotherhood with a historic opportunity to increase its power and maybe even become a controlling influence in the new Egyptian government.

What does this mean for the West? Should the U.S. and its allies fear the rise of the Brotherhood as a subversive group that would threaten U.S. interests? Political analysts remember what happened in Iran in 1979 and see in today's events in Egypt a possible parallel. The Iranian Revolution toppled a U.S.-backed government and replaced it with an Islamic fundamentalist state that has been extremely hostile to the West ever since.

Egypt under deposed president Hosni Mubarak was a U.S. ally, and if the Brotherhood were able to now move the country toward an Islamic theocracy dominated by conservative religious leaders, this would not be good news for the U.S. It might endanger America's Middle East ally Israel and undermine U.S. influence in Iraq and Afghanistan.

However, some U.S. analysts contend that the Brotherhood has moderated its radical views and can have a liberalizing influence in the Middle East. Professor Lorenzo Vidino of the Center for Security Studies in Zurich explains this viewpoint: "Optimists see the Brotherhood as a religiously conservative yet democratic-leaning movement that has undergone significant changes throughout its history and has now reached maturity—in which it fully rejects violence and engages in the democratic process with remarkable enthusiasm."

Yet dissecting the true nature of the organization remains difficult. "Pessimists perceive the Brothers simply as wolves in sheep's clothing," Vidino writes, and to them, "the Brotherhood merely portrays itself as a moderate organization seeking to operate within the democratic framework." They warn that "in reality, it has never abandoned its goal of establishing an Islamic state whose real nature has little to do with democracy."

a long history

Behind these two conflicting views of the Brotherhood lies a long history. The organization was founded in Egypt in 1928, when that

country was still under British rule. Originally it was largely a social welfare organization, doing charitable works and running schools. But it also had a militant side that fought against British occupation.

The Brotherhood attacked its rivals, murdering Egypt's prime minister in 1948. And after Egyptian independence in 1952, it launched three failed assassination attempts against Gamal Nasser, Egypt's popular president. Nasser banned the group, imprisoned its leaders, and tortured many of its members.

Yet the Brotherhood continued to grow. The writings of one of its members, an Egyptian named Sayyid Qutb, became very influential. Qutb advocated a violent struggle against the West as well as the governments of Muslim nations that did not adhere to the tenets of Islam.

Qutb had lived in the U.S. and did not like what he saw. Mideast experts Ian Baruma and Avishai Margalit summarized his beliefs: "He saw the West as a gigantic brothel, steeped in animal lust, greed, and selfishness," and "material greed, immoral behavior, inequality, and political oppression would end only once the world was ruled by God, and by His laws alone." For Qutb, this meant Islamic law as he interpreted it.

Activists like Qutb, who was executed by the Egyptian government in 1966, influenced many who would later join anti-Western terrorist groups. One such man was Ayman al-Zawahiri, who came from a wealthy Egyptian family and joined the Brotherhood when he was young.

In 1981, al-Zawahiri was imprisoned in Egypt following the assassination of President Anwar Sadat, in which the Brotherhood was complicit. After his release in 1984, he linked up with Osama bin Laden, eventually becoming deputy leader of his terrorist organization, al Qaeda, which was responsible for the attacks against the U.S. on September 11, 2001. After bin Laden was killed by U.S. forces ten years later, al-Zawahiri was named head of al Qaeda.

Q1: Should the U.S. try to shape events in Egypt or wait to see what kind of regime emerges there?

a growing political force

In the 1980s in Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood reframed its agenda, seeking to become a legitimate player in Egypt's political process. The government lifted many of its restrictions on the group, and in 2000 the Brotherhood won 17 seats in the People's Assembly. Unhappy with its increasing influence, President Mubarak ordered a crackdown. Many members of the Brotherhood were imprisoned, and the Egyptian



constitution was rewritten to ban any political party that had a religious foundation. Today, in post-Mubarak Egypt, the Brotherhood is now legal again and represents a powerful faction in the nation's political life.

The Brotherhood is also playing a role in other Arab states that have experienced turmoil this year. It also has an influence in Turkey, and is a factor in Lebanon's Islamic organization, Hezbollah. In the Palestinian territory of Gaza, the dominant party, Hamas, is an offshoot of the Brotherhood. Both Hezbollah and Hamas are listed as terrorist organizations by the U.S.

moderate or militant?

The public face the Brotherhood presents to the West is a moderate, conciliatory one. The BBC quotes Issam al-Aryan, a senior member of the Brotherhood in Egypt, as saying, "We want a civil state, based on Islamic principles. A democratic state, with a parliamentary system, with freedom to form parties, press freedom, and an independent and fair judiciary."

The Brotherhood's official English website seems to confirm this view. The site reports an address given by Mohamed Badie, the Brotherhood's chairman, where he called for "a civil state based on Islamic references guaranteeing equality, freedom and justice for all regardless of religion, ideological differences, sex or creed."

Not everyone is convinced by this moderate-sounding stance. Dore Gold, president of the Jerusalem Center of Public Affairs, warns that it would be a "dangerous misconception" to view the Brotherhood as a moderate group that does not threaten U.S. interests. To support his view, Gold cites chairman Badie's own words where he claimed that the Muslim world's progress "can only be attained through jihad and sacrifice and by raising a jihadi generation that pursues death, just as the enemies pursue life."

Badie also added, with apparent glee, that "the U.S. is now experiencing the beginning of its end, and is heading towards its demise."

Is the Muslim Brotherhood a threat or a potential partner for the U.S.? Only time will tell as the Egyptian revolution continues to unfold.

Q2: Is conservative Islam fundamentally opposed to Western values, or is this a misconception?