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## 11. Egyptian Demonstrations and the Muslim Brotherhood

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**Article summary:** According to the [Pew Research Center](#) [3], US media attention for the Egyptian protests has exceeded every foreign policy story over the last four years, commanding 56% of all news coverage. While initially surprising, upon reflection this story hits at the conjunction of many popular flashpoints: Israel, Islam, and popular democratic movements. It also takes place in a familiar civilization from Biblical storytelling, and involves to a lesser degree ancient Christian populations which can attract foreign sympathies. Yet one of the primary angles within Western media coverage has been the role, suspected or actual, of the Muslim Brotherhood. The dominance of this narrative has threatened to obscure the monumental shifts occurring in Egypt. At the same time, the specter rises and cannot be ignored.

### Article full text:

In analyzing this issue it is best that I place my biases up front for the reader to consider. I am a Christian living in Egypt with my wife and three young daughters. I work for the Center for Intercultural Dialogue and Translation, [a media and translation center](#) [4] in Cairo, dedicated to improving understanding between the Arab and Western worlds, as well as between the Muslims and Christians of Egypt. I believe that groups and individuals believed to be opposed to American interests or Christian freedoms should be specially designated recipients of Christian love, service, and favor. Their ideas, if necessary, should be rigorously opposed; utmost care, however, should be taken that they never be misrepresented or thoughtlessly rejected. They must not be feared, for perfect love casts out all fear. And love, we are told, hopes all things, believes all things, and keeps no record of wrong. Love never fails.

I confess also that I am not an expert on the Muslim Brotherhood. They are a multi-faceted organization with a long history. As such, there is more information about them, even from their own sources, than can be easily digested in a short time. Complexity does not lend toward clarity. I

hope to gain deep familiarity over time; I cannot yet claim it.

My background approach to this topic therefore suggests that I may be more openhearted and sympathetic toward the Muslim Brotherhood than they deserve. Though possible, it is not my intention. What follows will be my perspective, first hand and otherwise, in observing the role of the Brotherhood or other Islamist elements in the recent Egyptian protests.

To begin at the most basic level, I have heard Americans express sentiments worrying about these demonstrations, wondering what would happen 'if the Muslims took over'. Egypt is more than 90% Muslim; the Muslims took over a long time ago. What is intended, of course, is the worry that a specifically Muslim government would employ *sharia* law and take away rights recognized in the Western world as universal, and assumed to be antithetical to Islamic law. The statement, however, betrays a deep unfamiliarity among many Americans about the diversity which exists among Muslims, and within Islam. *Sharia* law means different things to different people, and many Muslims do not favor its implementation in any form. The current Egyptian constitution states already that all laws must be based on principles derived from *sharia* law. Some Egyptian Muslims oppose this article in its entirety; others believe that its implementation has not gone nearly far enough. There is no monolithic Muslim entity.

Therefore, in the context of a greater than 90% Muslim population, the vast majority of those protesting have been Muslim. The key question is what kind of Muslims are they? Before considering this question, however, it is useful to take note that not all protestors have been Muslims. Among their number have been thousands of Egyptian Christians.

Christian participation has by and large taken place against the will of church leadership. The Coptic Orthodox Church, by far the largest Christian denomination, has counseled its members not to take part. The Catholic and Protestant churches have not been as unequivocal, but have looked as well to substitute organized prayers for organized protests, while leaving the decision to demonstrate to the conscience of the individual believer. These prayer meetings have been very well attended, and the majority of Christians look askance at the protests. They fear that they are being driven by Islamist forces such as the Muslim Brotherhood, and will only lead to instability and an eventual worse outcome for Christians in Egypt if they succeed. Orthodox Church leadership, as well as the common Egyptian Christian, is inclined to support the state from which it derives its protection, even if they simultaneously complain about discrimination and neglect.

What puts this confidence to question, at least temporarily, is the fact that churches have not been attacked during this period in which nearly all law enforcement personnel have disappeared.<sup>[1]</sup> Every church in Egypt is assigned a police security contingent, and these vanished as well with the rest of their colleagues. Sectarian tensions have been rampant for years in the lead-up to these demonstrations, most notably seen in the bombing of a church in Alexandria on New Year's Eve in which 20 Christians died. At that time many Muslims poured out their sympathies and joined Christians in their churches the next week for Coptic Christmas celebrations, willing to stand in their defense and die with them if attacked.

During the protests, this spirit of interreligious unity has been reciprocated. As Muslims bow to pray in Tahrir Square, Christians have surrounded them in protection. Last Sunday witnessed a Christian prayer and praise service in the square, and Muslims joined in abundance. Signs and slogans assert

that Muslims and Christians are 'One Hand', and the cross and crescent are intertwined, as Bible and Qur'an are lifted high together. These images and pictures are commonplace.

But they are not everywhere. This is not to say that they are opposed in sentiment by other strands of protestors, only to assert that there are many other strands of protestors. As Muslims in Egypt are not monolithic, neither are the protests at Tahrir Square. Never do all the protestors share in one chant; among hundreds of thousands of people this is not possible. Rather, groups are formed, mostly organically, as chant ringleaders shout out their messages. Around each will form a following of a few hundred, but these are fluid and roll one into the other. For the most part the chants repeated are the same throughout:

- €€€€€€€€€ The people want the downfall of the regime!
- €€€€€€€€ Leave!
- €€€€€€€€ Illegitimate!
- €€€€€€€€ Fall, fall, Hosni Mubarak, Saudi Arabia is waiting for you!
- €€€€€€€€ Coward, coward, beloved of America!

And, to a lesser degree, there have been cries of '*Allahu Akbar*'.

I was able to attend demonstrations on two occasions. The first was on January 28, when demonstrators departed from their local mosques to begin their descent on Tahrir Square and other locations. I lingered near the tail end of the demonstrators from my neighborhood, and walked with them for an hour and a half as they joined with others merging into the demonstration path. There was an attitude of joy and freedom among the participants, as if they were enjoying something never before conceived of. Chants were in the manner listed above, but included clever additions to cajole the onlookers to join them. 'Descend! Descend!' 'One, two, where are the Egyptian people?' Many enrolled.

After a brief pause in my saunter I took a taxi down the path to rejoin them, but found instead a smaller group of about fifty youths. These were from a poorer neighborhood, and had a bit of an edge about them. '*Allahu Akbar*' was heard a bit more frequently from their lips, whereas it had been absent entirely in the group of thousands I witnessed earlier. My neighborhood is composed more of middle to upper class Egyptians, but the route taken wove through many poorer neighborhoods. While representing a cross-section of Cairo, it appeared to be dominated by educated citizens, with at least sufficient means of livelihood, if not more. This was not true of the second group I encountered.

After walking behind this group for a while, I veered off and took another taxi in effort to get closer to downtown. When I finally arrived on foot after a circuitous route due to many road closings, I found thousands of protestors jammed into an artery leading towards Tahrir Square. These were under fire by tear gas and water cannon, blockaded by riot police. It was an impasse, and there was minimal violence on either side. No one was bent on destruction, and the police were using restraint. At the same time, tear gas is not pleasant. I witnessed demonstrators convulsing from the

intake, and colleagues carrying them to the local hospital. On a side street I wondered why no one was using this path in their approach. I took a few steps and staggered backwards from gas used earlier that lingered unnoticed. Immediately my eyes watered and I began to choke. Quickly in retreat, I found fresh air and the symptoms subsided. Back on the main artery, however, the front lines refilled as some colleagues were evacuated. Most came prepared with surgical masks and onions. The people were not giving up.

As curfew approached I headed home, though the demonstrators remained. That evening the police disappeared, jails were opened by unknown forces, and looters descended upon the city, setting fire to the NDP headquarters and ransacking police stations throughout Cairo. Neighborhood militias were formed, and we barricaded our doors and slept unsoundly. This scenario followed for the next few days, as curfew obliged all to be home my mid-afternoon. Having by now taken Tahrir Square, the demonstrators ignored curfew, reticent to give up their hard won gains. Local militias in each neighborhood did so as well, reticent to surrender their properties to looters.

To return to the original question, then: Who are the demonstrators? First of all, it is important to assert that they were categorically not the looters. Those who took advantage of the police absence were either organized gangs of criminals or else ordinary Egyptians seeking quick profit. By distinction, the demonstrators, at least in the group I observed, had no inclinations toward violence or destruction of any kind. Even when under fire, there were no efforts against the shops which lined the streets of the artery. To be noted, however, a few Molotov cocktails were thrown at the feet of the police.

Second of all, though at this point it should be remembered that the crowd of my observation emerged from a middle to upper class neighborhood, they appeared educated, cultured, and aware of the new political import of their actions. They realized they were enjoying a freedom late discovered after the removal of fear. They were users of social media - Facebook, Twitter - and aware of freedoms enjoyed in other countries, and pursued by Arab colleagues in Tunisia. As I attempted to figure out the social makeup of the protestors, I wondered if they represented also the disenfranchised, largely depoliticized lower classes of Egypt. I did not notice these in abundance, though it is perfectly possible they emerged from other locations. Yet from my readings and following of the news, the protests appeared to be largely a middle class phenomena, to its credit or discredit. It was also disproportionately young, and there were significant numbers of women.

Third of all, there were no observable manifestations of religion. Many, if not most women wore the *hijab*, but this is representative of Egyptian society as a whole. Though it may be interpreted by many women as a religious statement, it is also the culturally mandated fashion at large. Not wearing a *hijab* in Egypt, for a Muslim, is more of a statement than wearing one. Christian women, to note, do not cover their heads.

As for men, a Muslim is indistinguishable from a Christian unless he chooses to identify himself. For a Muslim this can be through a particular dress - long robes and a beard - or by a callous mark on one's forehead, indicating frequent prostrations. For a Christian this can be through wearing a cross around one's neck or by a tattoo on the hand or wrist. These markers are harder to observe unless made obvious, and few of them were obvious to me. The crowd I followed appeared to have no religious identity, either in dress, appearance, or slogan. For a population in which religious identity is near paramount, this was remarkable.

Returning specifically to the Muslim Brotherhood, they took a very cautious approach to the protests. The movement emerged rapidly, but there was advance warning. Social media sites began spreading the word that protests would be held against police brutality, in deliberate irony, on Police Day, January 25. A few months earlier a Facebook group had formed around the memory of Khalid Said, a young man allegedly killed while in police custody. This group mobilized the early demonstrations, and other non-establishment political movements, such as the one labeled April 6, carried forward the call.

The Muslim Brotherhood did not. Some members made statements that they would attend the Police Day protests, and then more official voices denied their participation. While in all likelihood there was involvement on the part of individual members, there was no leadership provision. Certainly the Muslim Brotherhood took no role in mobilization, which is significant as this is one of the strengths of their organization. Earlier, would-be presidential candidate Mohamed El Baradei, an established secular reformist figure, conducted a signature campaign to press for constitutional amendments, and the greatest number in support by far was brought by the Brotherhood. El Baradei expressed his support for the protests, though he initially did not attend. The Brotherhood, by contrast, was far from clear in their position, but noticeably absent in any tangible way.

Much like the Orthodox Church, the Muslim Brotherhood has maintained an ambiguous relationship with the state. The church maintains official and public support of the ruling system, though it harbors complaints over its handling of Coptic affairs. Conversely, the Muslim Brotherhood is officially a banned political party at odds with the ruling system, though it is widely suspected of making back door deals with the government to secure political gains for each. Over the past few decades there have been alternating periods of severe repression and relative openness toward the Brotherhood, with repression being the prevailing stance. Brotherhood members are routinely arrested and jailed, even if they are released shortly thereafter. This is especially common in periods preceding electoral contests, which bolsters their opposition to the state.

During the 2005 parliamentary elections the Brotherhood experienced a slight opening vis-à-vis the state. President George Bush was actively pressing President Mubarak for political reforms, and in a manner, Mubarak relented. While few will maintain that the election was free and fair, 'banned' Muslim Brotherhood candidates running as independents won nearly one-quarter of the seats. Had the elections been open it is possible that many of these candidates might have won anyway; the suspicion, however, was widespread that the Brotherhood made a deal with the regime. For the government, one-quarter representation would pose no threat toward legislative intransigence toward executive policies. Furthermore, the challenge posed by Bush was given an answer: If you don't like our governance, look at the alternative. Shortly thereafter, Bush's public stance toward the promotion of democracy began to wane.

For the Brotherhood, if a deal was reached, the benefit was a major step towards legitimacy. Their 'independent' candidates could monitor and criticize government policies from the inside, and achieve a national presence with several perks of position. Over the following years, many Brotherhood members became household names. Their grassroots activities of mobilization and social service provision continued, but they added a political platform from which to make their message known.

What was this message? I confess that here my lack of expertise in Muslim Brotherhood affairs will

limit my ability to speak authoritatively. My impression, however, is that they behaved as a typical political party, and as such had a message that vacillated. Voices emerged in defense of a civil state; others preferred greater implementation of God's laws. Voices asserted that Copts and women had equal rights with all other citizens; others stated that Copts would need to submit to Islamic law as *dhimmis*, in which they are tolerated, protected, but not equal.<sup>[2]</sup> It was clear among all, however, that the movement had renounced violence, and while it opposed vigorously the ruling party, it did not want to be seen as an imminent threat to stability.

Fast forward to the 2010 parliamentary elections, and it will be clear that this time a deal was not in the works. Though observers imagined final results would shift the minority opposition from the Brotherhood to the liberal Wafd party, the results were astounding. A mere 3% of opposition candidates won seats, which included only one 'independent' candidate affiliated with the Brotherhood. Though several candidates advanced to the runoff stage, by this point the Brotherhood was ready to denounce the elections as fraudulent, boycotted the runoff, and decertified the one winning candidate who refused to give up his seat. Incidentally, El Baradei has urged all opposition parties to boycott the entire election. Muslim Brotherhood leadership which had supported him in his signature collection campaign ignored his advice, believing it better to work within the system and expose any fraud which emerged in the election process. Their position was not illegitimate, but the results were far from what they expected.

Given this reality, why did the Muslim Brotherhood not take an active role in advancing the Police Day demonstrations? Like most Egyptians, they were probably not anticipating the great turnout that emerged. Protests in Egypt had by this point become common. Though limited in size and cause, nearly every day downtown could be heard the chants of this or that group, protesting wages, housing, or some other issue. Yet it was clear that the Police Day protests were political, and the authorities gave ample warning they would not tolerate it. If the Brothers were present, in their likely estimation this would only increase the clampdown. Hundreds of Brotherhood members had been arrested in the recent parliamentary elections, and organizational focus was concerned with survival, as well as internal fissures that had emerged as younger members favored the boycotting position of El Baradei. Surely they figured these 'social media' protests would pass, and their battles would be best pitched at another time. Besides, though the parliamentary option was closed for now, might true political legitimacy be better won in cooperation with the state, rather than in outright antagonism? As an old and venerable organization founded in the 1920s, they could afford to take a long term view. Certainly, the power of the state showed no signs of enfeeblement.

As the protests gained steam, however, opposition parties across the board began taking notice. Observers generally posit that all legal opposition political parties have made similar deals with the government throughout the years, and do not have a broad base of support. This is not quite true among the Egyptian elite, but their reach does not generally extend to the street, to the common Egyptian. The Muslim Brotherhood does, though their appeal is debated. Substantial numbers of observers do not believe their political agenda is favored by the majority of Egyptians, even though their work in social service provision is appreciated. In any event, the Brotherhood operates in this regard as a quasi-political party that does deal with the ruling system, even if it is not aligned with it as the other parties are believed to be. Everyone, however, began making cautious statements in support of the protestors, waiting to see if some sort of spoils could emerge.

As I observed the demonstrations for the second time, I could sense the changes. On February 1 the protestors had taken firm positions in Tahrir Square, and the army had taken to the streets to reassert some control and stability, welcomed enthusiastically by the protestors. By and large the crowd was the same as I had experienced earlier. Though the majority was young and apparently middle class, all segments of society were present. Women were out in abundance; several bald

heads were present; families held children on their shoulders with placards calling for the downfall of the regime. Several signs bore particularly Christian messages. Many asserted national unity. All exclaimed they were Egyptians, and flags flew with pride. It was a carnival atmosphere, though very serious. The people anticipated winning, and were reveling in their newly discovered political power.

From some quarters, however, the main chant began to change. Now it was 'the people want the execution of the president'. By no means did this replace '... the downfall of the regime'; by no means was it present everywhere. But, neither was it isolated. It caught me off guard; nearly did I approach one of the chanters and ask him to reconsider. If there is to be a new system, it should be based on mercy and forgiveness, which are completely compatible with Islamic values. Yet the situation, as described before, was so fluid that by the time I considered raising the issue the group had changed chants again, this time to one of the more familiar slogans. Yet if you looked up, there dangling from a lamppost was an effigy of President Mubarak, hung from a noose. It must be emphasized that these were simply elements of the protest, they did not characterize it. But they were there.

It was impossible to tell if the sporadic groups chanting for the execution of the president bore any Islamic marks. This time as well, most men were indistinguishable as per religious affiliation. But in one particular section of the square 30 to 50 Muslim sheikhs had gathered, and were leading their own version of the chants. One changed the popular slogan into 'The Azhar wants the downfall of the regime'.

These men were Azhar graduates, proclaiming in their dress and demeanor that they were Muslim scholars. It seemed the majority were employees of the Ministry of Endowments, which oversees the regulation of mosques and religious properties. Yet despite their proclamation, they did not represent the Azhar, which is the highest institution of Islamic learning in Egypt, and widely credited as chief in the whole Muslim world. It is also a state-run body, and the Grand Sheikh is appointed by the Egyptian president. These protestors wanted him removed as well.

Were these sheikhs members of the Muslim Brotherhood? It was impossible to say; within the Azhar there are scholars allied with the Brotherhood, while others are opposed to their agenda. Clearly, however, their chanted slogans were Islamic. They proclaimed '*Allahu Akbar*'. They cried for the implementation of God's law. Yet they also preached that God's laws brought freedom, to Muslim and non-Muslim alike. They carried signs that stated no church had been attacked during this period of lawlessness. They asserted that this was an Egyptian revolution, and they were simply one segment of the Egyptian population, and certainly not in leadership. They were frustrated with the government for corruption, for violation of Islamic rules of governance in terms of justice and equality. *Allahu Akbar*, they explained, was not meant as an Islamic cry of identity, but as a religious challenge to the regime. It was purposed as *jihad* in all its proper manifestations - an effort to put right what is wrong. I sensed deep anger; I did not sense violence or any anti-Christian sentiment.

Yet the mood in the square was slightly different, and in a way that was somewhat disturbing. The next day the horses and camels descended on the protestors, and a night of violence engulfed Tahrir. Pro-government gangs led a charge against the demonstrators, but by the breaking of dawn they had held their ground. Some of the chants the next morning reflected a night under siege: 'The people want the execution of the murderer.'

Afterwards the government began reaching out and inviting the opposition groups into dialogue. The first day all of the traditional political parties rejected the overture, demanding first the resignation of President Mubarak. The next day, they agreed to talk. The Muslim Brotherhood was among them, though they insisted they were participating as a 'feel out' process to test the sincerity of the government, as well as to make sure the demands of the protestors were heard.

Regardless of the wisdom or sincerity of the Brotherhood position, it was at sharp odds with the amorphous, leaderless reaction of the protestors.<sup>[3]</sup> They consistently rejected each and every concession as a simple effort to placate the protests and keep ultimate control over the system. Their rejection also stemmed from fear that if they would give up in this stage the government would find them later and punish them. Certainly the Brotherhood by this time was part of the protests, but their interaction with the government cost them much legitimacy among the majority of their colleagues, who had engineered these demonstrations on their own. How much legitimacy lost is yet to be seen, as the story is not yet over and this analysis describes a situation only a few days old.

Therefore, the big question remains; the specter over the entire proceedings: What is the Brotherhood up to, and will they emerge victorious in the end? Will the pangs for democratic change result ultimately in an Islamic state constructed by the Muslim Brotherhood? Are they taking over the movement? Are they hijacking it?

Again, it is impossible to say, for the story is ever evolving. Only yesterday, however, I received testimony from an evangelical pastor who visited the square. He related that he went not to protest, but to observe what was being said, what attitude was manifest. There were no signs, he related, of a peculiar Islamic character to the demonstrations. There were no Islamic slogans; there was no sectarian spirit. Instead, he declared it to be a fully Egyptian movement, with many Christians present. It is focused on freedom, not *sharia*. Did he misread the situation? It is possible; Tahrir Square is wide and its denizens are diverse in perspective. Yet he went wary of Islamic tendencies, and he found none.

This essay does not argue on behalf of the protestors or in defense of their demands. It takes no position on the question of whether President Mubarak should step down, or if his government will sincerely negotiate. It makes no statement on US policy objectives, or on legitimate political reforms. Rather, it is a description of the nature of the protests. Many concerns are expressed that these demonstrations are the work of the Muslim Brotherhood and an effort to achieve an Islamic state. From the perspective described here, this is highly doubtful.

What cannot be asserted with similar certainty is the outcome of these demonstrations. Is the Muslim Brotherhood waiting in the wings? If there is democratic transformation will their organizational prowess and social service reputation be sufficient to win governing majorities? Once in governance, will they reject pluralism and consolidate power, violating principles of freedom and human rights for which they now clamor? Will they marginalize Copts and restrict Muslims with opinions other than their own?

Or, if they win majorities, will they work sincerely according to their mainstream voices that reject violence and believe in a civil state? Will they incorporate the participation of women and Copts?



Will their version of *sharia* be a moderate and inclusive interpretation of Islamic law? Will they create a political system different from the objectives of the West, but in accordance with the reasonable will of their own people? Widespread among Christians as well as secular leaning Muslims is the fear that the outcome will be a turn for the worst.

The Muslim Brotherhood should not be trusted, but on the account of their being politicians, not on account of their being Islamists. The West is rightfully wary of the outcome of these demonstrations, but Egyptians themselves appear to be more so, as is their prerogative. These are their efforts, and they do not wish to see them hijacked by anyone – the West, the government, opposition forces, or Islamist opportunism. Anyone of these forces may succeed in wresting control of the movement in the end. Good analysis and political calculations must be employed by all in defense of their understood interests. Egyptian interests must be honored chiefly among all, as determined by Egyptians in their collective struggle.

This essay does not wish to outline the proper opinions, reactions, or policy positions to be adopted by Westerners. There are a variety of responses that are legitimate and logical. What is necessary is that the movement be understood for what it is. So far, it is not an Islamist movement; the Muslim Brotherhood is not in control. Attempts to paint the picture otherwise are suspect and perhaps manipulative.

They may gain control. This is a fair an open question. Similarly fair is the policy question of the balance between favoring popular democratic movements and controlling the results to ensure a government that favors Western interests, however defined. May the West have wisdom to advise and influence properly; may Egypt have the wisdom to decide best its own course in accordance with popular will and respect for basic freedoms and essential stability.

May all understand each other properly, and from the ensuing respect make their independent decisions, each to intend the good of all.

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[1] In the town of Rafah, February 5, on the border with Gaza there was a fire set in a church while it was empty. Damage was limited and no one was harmed. This situation is believed to be unique due to the border tensions between Egypt and the Gaza Strip.

[2] Dr. Amin Makram Ebeid, a physician and board member of CAWU overseeing the work of Arab West Report, believes that this scenario is unlikely to take place, due to the very clear climate of creedal blindness on the part of the youth revolutionaries. He notes that the past few weeks have shown no evidence of active or radical Islamism, and hopes this spirit will continue. He is wary, however, of the recent apparent liberalization of the Muslim Brotherhood, not sure if this is an attempt at dissimulation in which they will return to their original ideology once in power. He believes liberal Muslims and Christians should be committed to be policy of peace while maintaining vigilance in order to prevent such a power transfer.

Dr. Mahmoud Khayyal, a pharmacology professor teaching at the Azhar and a frequent advisor to Arab West Report, agrees that the Muslim Brotherhood did not play a leading role in the demonstrations, but more actively doubts their intentions. He believes them to have been malicious since they were first established, following the sick ideas of ibn Taymiyya, al-Mawdudi, Jamal al-Din

al-Afghani, and to a lesser extent Mohamed Abdo, who is widely praised in Egypt. Their basic operation is to gain power in society and then rule, and in this he finds them to be very Machiavellian.

[3] Dr. Khayyal disagrees that the protests were leaderless; instead, the leaders guarded their identities and did not wish to be made public. In fact, the protests were well-organized, and Dr. Khayyal had some contact with leadership in arranging supply of medicine, food, and blankets. The primary characteristic of the leadership was a commitment to peaceful protest, echoed in the oft-heard chant 'salmiyya' – peaceful. On one occasion a protestor lost his nerve and wished to attack a policeman, and was shouted down by his fellows not to use violence or be aggressive.

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