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THE GLOBAL MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD: MYTH OR REALITY?

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Lorenzo Vidino



THE IMAAM AL-SHAHEED HASAN AL-BANNA, GENERAL GUIDE OF THE MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD, JUNE 1947

The Muslim Brotherhood was founded in Egypt in 1928, but its ideas and methods soon spread to other countries in the Arab and Muslim world. Today organizations that, albeit in very different ways and with varying degrees of intensity, trace their origins to the Muslim Brotherhood exist in virtually all Muslim-majority countries and in most countries where a Muslim community exists.

In each country the movement has taken different forms, adapting to the local political conditions. In Middle Eastern countries where it was tolerated, like Jordan, it existed as a political party; in those where it was persecuted, like Syria, it remained an underground movement, devoted to *dawa* and, in some cases, to violence. In Palestine it took a peculiar turn and became Hamas, which, as the Hamas Charter states, is the official Palestinian branch of the Brotherhood.¹ In the West, it took locally familiar forms, such as civil rights groups and religious and lobbying organizations.

Are these entities connected? Is there a super-organization, a global Muslim Brotherhood central entity directing or coordinating the activities of these groups? In the 1970s, as its members were being released from jail and the organization was slowly regaining the ability to plan activities under the less restrictive regime of Sadat, the

¹ For an extensive analysis of how the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood became Hamas, see Azzam Tamimi, *Hamas: A History from Within* (Northampton, MA: Olive Branch Press, 2007), 10–51; and Abu-Amr, *Islamic Fundamentalism in the West Bank and Gaza*, 1–22.

Egyptian Brotherhood worked to create a structured international organization.² “The Brotherhood organizations in Kuwait [*sic*], Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and Iraq agreed to join the Egyptians, with their headquarters in Egypt and the *murshid* as leader,” recalls Abdelwahab al Affendi, a London-based academic and former member of the National Islamic Front, Sudan’s Islamist party.³ In 1982 a formal International Organization of the Muslim Brotherhood was established as “a comprehensive Islamic body working to establish Allah’s religion on earth,” composed of several institutions (a General Guide, a Guidance Bureau, and a Shura Council) assigned to coordinate the activities of the various branches.⁴ Uniting some of the top leaders of Brotherhood branches from several countries of the Arab world—but with the Egyptians always dominating—the International Organization aimed at crafting a unified strategy for the movement, arbitrating internal conflicts, and dividing funds.



BANNER GRAPHIC FROM IKHWAN WEBSITE

The experiment failed. Travel bans and other security restrictions prevented members of the various branches from traveling freely and meeting regularly. Most important, the attempt to create a multinational organization failed because of the reluctance of all branches to accept the leading role the Egyptians had reserved for themselves. If the Egyptians had in mind a sort of Soviet-style “Muslim Comintern,” with Cairo in place of Moscow, other branches and affiliates rejected the idea, opting for more decentralization.⁵

The Egyptian Brotherhood’s failure to create a Cairo-dominated transnational structure highlight one undeniable truth: a formal International Organization of the Muslim Brotherhood still exists, but it is hardly a fully functioning, all-



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² Interview with Dr. Abd El Monem Abou El Fotouh, Cairo, December 2008.

³ Wendy Kristianasen, “A Row in the Family,” *Le Monde Diplomatique*, April 2000.

⁴ Interview with Kamal Helbawy, London, December 2008; Israel Elad Altman, *Strategies of the Muslim Brotherhood Movement, 1928–2007*, monograph for the Hudson Institute, January 2009, 5–6; interview with Israel Elad Altman, Paris, May 2009.

⁵ Altman, *Strategies of the Muslim Brotherhood Movement, 1928–2007*, 5–6.

overseeing Muslim command center.⁶ Over the past fifty years the ideology and methodology envisioned by al Banna and then refined and re-elaborated by scores of other scholars, many of whom lacked any formal affiliation with the Brotherhood, has influenced generations of Muslim activists who have created all sorts of organizations throughout the world. Yet the operational influence exerted by the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood over them is minimal to nonexistent, even though all groups recognize their intellectual debt to it.



Therefore, today the term “Muslim Brotherhood” can simultaneously encapsulate various realities. It is still an organization with a formal structure in Egypt and in various Middle Eastern countries, where some groups do view themselves as local branches. But, most

notably, the Brotherhood is also a global ideological movement in which like-minded individuals interact through an informal yet very sophisticated international network of personal, financial, and especially ideological ties. Mohammed Akef, the former *murshid* of the Egyptian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, describes it as “a global movement whose members cooperate with each other throughout the world, based on the same religious worldview—the spread of Islam, until it rules the world.”⁷

Senior members of the Brotherhood have repeatedly made clear that, at the international level, it is not a structured organization of card-carrying members, but rather an ideological movement that transcends formal affiliation. Membership comes by adopting certain ideas and methods, not by swearing allegiance or signing one’s name in a secret registry. Already in al Banna’s mind, despite his almost obsessive focus on organization, the ideological message of the Brotherhood was much more important than formal affiliations: “Leave aside appearances and formalities. Let the principle and priority of our union be thought, morality, action. We are brothers in the service of Islam, we are the Muslim Brotherhood.”⁸ Sixty years later, Akef confirms that “a person who is in the global arena and believes in the Muslim Brotherhood’s path is

⁶ Robert S. Leiken and Steven Brooke, “The Moderate Muslim Brotherhood,” *Foreign Affairs* (March/April 2007).

⁷ Interview in *Asharq Al-Awsat*, December 11, 2005.

⁸ Tariq Ramadan, *Aux Sources du Renouveau Musulman* (Lyon: Tawhid, 2002), 11.

considered part of us and we are part of him.”⁹ Senior Brotherhood leader in exile Yussuf Nada believes that describing the Muslim Brotherhood even as an informal movement is too confining and prefers to see it as a “common way of thinking.”¹⁰ Abd El Monem Abou El Fotouh refers to the Brotherhood as “an international school of thought,” acknowledging that, whereas the Brothers have been unable to build an international organization, they have been very successful at creating an informal network of groups and individuals that have the same understanding of Islam and the same vision for the future.¹¹

Entities belonging to the “global Muslim Brotherhood” work according to a common vision but in complete operational independence. There are consultations and constant communication, but each is free to pursue its goals as it deems appropriate. Therefore the global Muslim Brotherhood is today most properly identified not as a group or even a loose federation, but simply as an ideological movement, in which different branches choose their own tactics to achieve their short-term goals in complete independence. What binds them together is a deep belief in Islam as a comprehensive way of life that, in the long term, they hope to turn into a political system using different methods in different times and places. Taking full advantage of the benefits of globalization and modern technology, they constitute a perfect example of modern transnational activism: informal, heterogeneous, and in constant evolution.¹²

In a 2008 interview, Mohamed Habib, first deputy chairman of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, confirmed this analysis of the organizations that locate themselves in the Brotherhood’s galaxy. “There are entities that exist in many countries all over the world,” said Habib. “These entities have the same ideology, principle and objectives but they work in different circumstances and different contexts. So, it is reasonable to have decentralization in action so that every entity works according to its circumstances and according to the problems it is facing and in their framework.”¹³ Habib



MOHAMED HABIB

⁹ *Al-Sharq al-Awsat* (London), December 11, 2005.

¹⁰ Interview with Yussuf Nada, Campione d’Italia, July 14, 2008.

¹¹ Interview with Dr. Abd El Monem Abou El Fotouh, Cairo, December 2008.

¹² Interview with John Voll, Washington, October 2008; for a definition of “transnational activism” see Sidney Tarrow, *The New Transnational Activism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

¹³ Interview with MB Deputy Chairman Mohamed Habib in *al Ahrar Daily*, as reported by the Muslim Brotherhood’s official Web site, June 16, 2008, <http://www.ikhwanweb.com/Article.asp?ID=17267&LevelID=1&SectionID=0> (accessed August 1, 2008).

added that such decentralization serves two objectives: “First: It adds flexibility to [the] movement. Second: It focuses on action. Every entity in its own country can issue its own decision because it is more aware of the problems, circumstances and context in which they are working. However, there is some centralization in some issues.”

Like any movement that spans continents and has millions of affiliates, the global Muslim Brotherhood is hardly a monolithic block. Personal and ideological divisions are common. Divergences emerge on how the movement should try to achieve its goals and, in some cases, even on what those goals should actually be. Issues such as the First Gulf War or the *hijab* controversy in France have spurred strong internal debates, which in some cases have degenerated into personal feuds. Senior scholars and activists often vie with one another over theological issues, political positions, access to financial sources, and leadership of the movement. Despite these inevitable differences, their deep belief in the inherent political nature of Islam and their adoption of al Banna’s organization-focused methodology in order to implement it make them part of the informal global movement of the Muslim Brotherhood.

**For more on the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, see:
“Egyptian Crosscurrents: The Muslim Brotherhood and Democracy on the Nile”**

Lorenzo Vidino, Ph.D., is an academic and security expert who specializes in Islamism and political violence in Europe and North America. A visiting fellow at the RAND Corporation in Washington DC from October 2010, he previously held fellowships at the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, the U.S. Institute of Peace, and the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy. He is the author of two books (his latest, The New Muslim Brotherhood in the West, was published by Columbia University Press in the fall of 2010. He has testified before the U.S. Congress and consults with governments, law firms, think tanks and media in several countries. A native of Milan, Italy, he holds a law degree from the University of Milan Law School and a doctorate in international relations from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy.

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