

The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood in the Global Arena

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Summary: The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood is the oldest and one of the most influential Islamist movements in the Sunni world. The organization has offered an ideological framework and organizational model for a wide variety of Islamist movements and parties, from Morocco to Indonesia. The evolution of the Brotherhood since 1928 has been marked by tensions around three questions: whether and how to participate in politics, whether violent tactics are justified, and what it means to pursue an Islamic state. These ideological debates have occurred against a background of internal fragmentation, the need to go underground during repression, and regional dynamics pulling the Brotherhood's attention outwards. These dynamics came to the forefront once again after the 2011 uprisings, which catapulted the Muslim Brotherhood to the forefront of Egyptian politics. Since the 2013 military coup in Egypt the Brotherhood has been severely repressed and organizationally weak, pulled into the geopolitical frictions of the region, yet undergoing important internal debates not only about the future of the movement, but also about the nature and role of Islamism in politics. The future of the Brotherhood remains an open question and is bound to leave a mark on the future of political Islam.

Keywords: Islamism, Muslim Brotherhood, Middle East, social movements, Egypt

Introduction

The Muslim Brotherhood is one of the most influential Islamist movements of the twentieth century. Founded in Egypt in 1928 as an Islamic welfare organization, over the subsequent

decades, the Brotherhood expanded into a highly organized, disciplined and deeply networked socio-religious movement, with branches and affiliates all over the world. The Egyptian Brotherhood has offered both an ideological framework and an organizational model for many Islamist parties, from Morocco to Indonesia. While its early ideologues continue to be regarded as foundational readings of gradualist Islamist thought, the evolution of the movement also underscores some of the philosophical tensions underlying its approach. Almost a century after its founding, the Brotherhood finds itself once again severely repressed and organizationally weak, implicated in the geopolitics of the region, yet undergoing important internal debates not only about the future of the movement, but also about the nature and role of Islamism in politics.

The Early History of the Brotherhood

The Princeton Readings on Islamist Thought defines Islamist movements as “contemporary movements that attempt to return to the scriptural foundations of the Muslim community, excavating and reinterpreting them for application to the present-day social and political world,” regarding them “not only as an expression of God’s will but as an antidote to the moral bankruptcy inaugurated by Western cultural dominance from abroad, aided and abetted by corrupt Muslim rulers from within the *umma* (Islamic community)” (Euben and Zaman 2009, 4). The Muslim Brotherhood is the oldest Islamist movement in the Sunni world. The movement was founded by Hassan al-Banna, a schoolteacher who was not educated as a religious scholar, but who “exuded selfless religious devotion and unflagging energy and, by all accounts, was preternaturally gifted with remarkable personal charisma, rhetorical skill, and organizational acumen” (Euben and Zaman 2009, 49).

Al-Banna initially wanted to educate the public on religious matters and promote his view of Islam as a way of life. He understood Islam to be inherently political and a comprehensive

system that could provide a framework for all aspects of life. In line with this vision, he wanted to establish a complex and ambitious movement that went beyond religious education or charitable action to seek the gradual transformation of society. Al-Banna saw the Brotherhood as serving two primary goals: freeing the “the Islamic fatherland” from foreign domination, and establishing a “free Islamic state” (H. al-Banna 1978, 31–32). The Brotherhood’s ideology remained somewhat ambiguous on the question of what an Islamic state is, focusing instead on education reform, fighting “poverty, ignorance, disease and crime,” and working towards establishing an exemplary Islamic society (al-Banna 1978, 33). Al-Banna created a multi-faceted organization that established schools and hospitals, published newspapers, and built a broad network of social services (Hussaini 1984, 56).

While the Brotherhood has adapted and evolved over time, since the early period the movement was structured as a hierarchical organization, with well-defined norms and regulations, clear chains of command, specialized bodies, and certain elements of internal democracy. Al-Anani describes the tight-knit structure of the Brotherhood as being centered around two central axes (Al-Anani 2016, 103–4). The vertical axis defines the pyramidal structure, with the General Guide at the top, a Guidance Bureau underneath, which serves as an executive body, and a Shura Council that serves as the decision-making body, and which consists of ninety members elected from the different provinces. Underneath these decision-making bodies at the national level, the grassroots movement is organized at the local level into families (*usar*), who form a division (*shu’ba*), which in turn aggregate into a district (*mantiq*). In each province, all the districts come under an administrative office (*maktab idari*) (Al-Anani 2016, 103–4; Lagervall 2021, 78). The horizontal axis consists of specialized units (such as planning, elections, sport activities, etc.), committees (such as financial, political, legal, etc.) and sections

(such as students, charity, external affairs, etc.), which oversee the various aspects of the Brotherhood work.

For most of its history, the Brotherhood focused on establishing a pious society in Egypt. Al-Banna's vision was one of bottom-up gradual Islamization, where reformation starts with the individual, and ultimately transforms society, which eventually leads to an Islamic state, and the revival of the caliphate (S. M. H. al-Banna 2002, 46). Until that stage would be achieved, al-Banna outlined concrete policy preferences based on his religious understanding. He frequently sent letters to the king and political officials advocating for these policies. For instance, he heavily criticized government corruption, and called for establishing a ministry of social affairs, reducing unemployment and expanding public enterprises, implementing an Islamic banking system that would offer interest-free loans, protecting domestic industries, diversifying agriculture, reforming labor legislation to protect workers, improving water supplies and improving living standards for peasants (Lia 2006, 209–11). In his famous 1936 letter to King Farouk, al-Banna demanded a wide variety of reforms that would conform laws to Islamic legislation, such as changing work hours so that they do not conflict with prayer times, “conditioning the people to respect public morality,” ending prostitution, gambling and drinking, punishing fornication, segregating male and female students, censoring plays, films and music, introducing religious instruction in schools, protecting the masses from monopolistic companies, encouraging agricultural and industrial counseling and prohibiting usury (H. al-Banna 1978). On economic issues, during the early period, the Brotherhood had nationalist socialist tendencies, calling on the state to prohibit monopolies, tap private wealth, prohibit foreigners from acquiring property and collect zakat to solve poverty (Hussaini 1984, 57).

The goal of liberating the Muslim *umma* from foreign domination was most salient during the early history of the movement. This goal was both in reference to unshackling Egypt from British influence, and liberating Palestine from foreign occupation. The Brotherhood's earliest forays into political dissent were prompted by the question of Palestine, after al-Banna's brother traveled to Jerusalem to meet the Mufti. At the third general conference of the Brotherhood in March 1935, Hassan al-Banna appealed for money to assist the Arab cause and established a committee in charge of advocating for the Palestinian cause (Mitchell 1993, 55). During the Arab Revolt (1936 – 1939), the Brotherhood raised money, published pamphlets, organized demonstrations, and eventually also started sending volunteers to fight in Palestine (Mitchell 1993, 16; Zollner 2008, 12).

The mobilization around Palestine represented a turning point for the Brotherhood, in terms of its organizational structure, ideological tenets, repertoire of contention, and relation to the state. Organizationally, around the same time that the Brotherhood started mobilizing volunteers for Palestine it also developed paramilitary entities known as “rovers” and “battalions,” which offered rigorous physical training (Wickham 2013, 26). The Brotherhood also formed a military wing, known as the Secret Apparatus. This unit was initially formed to support the fighting in Palestine and resist British troops, but over time its members also found themselves clashing with the police inside Egypt.

Ideologically, the involvement in Palestine prompted al-Banna to think more explicitly about justifications for violence against foreign forces, which culminated in his tract “On Jihad.” For al-Banna, resistance against foreign occupation was a duty and one of the pillars of Islam (H. al-Banna 1978, 135). Yet such resistance could not be indiscriminate, and it was forbidden to “slay women, children, and old men . . . or to disturb monks and hermits, and the peaceful who offer

no resistance” (H. al-Banna 1978, 153–54). Al-Banna’s guidelines on what constituted legitimate targets of resistance is analogous to the distinctions made in just war theory between guerilla warfare and terrorism. Al-Banna also differentiated between foreign occupiers and domestic rulers, though at times his messaging was more ambiguous regarding the legitimacy of targeting the domestic government (Matesan 2020, 44). British policies in Palestine and Egypt led to increasingly militant activism and rhetoric against the Egyptian government, setting the Brotherhood on a path of growing confrontation with the state (Matesan 2020, 41).

By the mid-1940s, the Brotherhood participated in anti-Zionist and anti-British demonstrations, which at times escalated into looting or attacks on Jewish and British properties. While al-Banna insisted on tolerating Judaism as a religion and opposing Zionism (Matesan 2020, 45), the increasingly contentious tactics led to growing clashes with the police and suspicion by the state. In December 1948, the government dissolved the Muslim Brotherhood, marking what is known in the collective memory of the Brotherhood as the first ordeal (*mihna*), and the start of multiple waves of severe repression and persecution by the government. Not even three weeks later, a Muslim Brother assassinated Prime Minister al-Nuqrashi. While it remains disputed whether this was an act endorsed by the Brotherhood, al-Banna’s subsequent attempts at reconciliation with the government were unsuccessful, and the Islamist leader was assassinated, most likely by the state security services, on February 12, 1949 (Mitchell 1993, 71; Gerges 2018, 73).

The next section will outline the evolution and trajectory of the Brotherhood after al-Banna’s death. However, this early history of the movement (1928-1949) was a critical period that brought to the fore several tensions, which would come to define the movement over the course of its evolution, and which are once again relevant in the aftermath of the 2013 military coup.

These tensions were centered around several questions: whether and how to participate in politics, whether violent tactics were ever justified, and how to pursue an Islamic state. These ideological debates occurred against a background of internal fragmentation, the need to go underground during repression, and regional dynamics shaping group priorities and at times pulling the Brotherhood in different directions.

The question of participation in formal politics came to the forefront in the mid-1980s, as will be detailed in the next section. But whether looking at the debates around politics from the 1980s, or the internal discussions around politics occurring in the Brotherhood since its ousting from power in 2013, the discussion inevitably links back to the early period and Hassan al-Banna's thoughts regarding the inseparability of religion and politics. While al-Banna saw it necessary to participate in politics, offer advice and hold rulers accountable, he was also a vocal critic of partisanship (*hizbiyya*) (Pahwa 2023, 35). For him, partisanship led to power-seeking and divisions, whereas the obligation of a righteous Muslim was to “cooperate with others and build a strong, united nation”(Pahwa 2023, 35). While al-Banna thought it important to support those who worked for the victory of Islam and oppose those who did not work to re-establish its rule, he also favored constitutional rule, and understood an Islamic state as “a distant, collective religious obligation more than a concrete operational objective” (Pahwa 2023, 35–36). For him, one of the issues that required most immediate attention at the time was Palestine (Pahwa 2023, 36).

The Palestinian cause remained a salient issue for the Brotherhood after this early period, but it moved to the background for most of the movement's history, as its efforts centered on Egypt. After the October 7, 2023 attacks and the ensuing war in Gaza, Palestine became once again a prevalent theme in internal Brotherhood messaging, though this time the engagement has

remained rhetorical. Nonetheless, Palestine continues to remain a salient issue for Islamists, and a cause that is framed as a religious duty. This underlines that even as movements like the Brotherhood focus most of their activities domestically, the line between the national, international and transnational can be blurred. This can be seen not only in the solidarity shown to Palestine and other Muslim communities, but also in the fact that when repression becomes extreme, part of the Brotherhood goes underground, and part of the movement goes into exile.

The question of Palestine also prompted al-Banna to consider under what circumstances violent tactics would be legitimate. While in an early magazine al-Banna called for *jihad* against corrupt institutions (Matesan 2020, 44), his emphasis on nonviolent tactics in the domestic realm came to define the Brotherhood for most of its history. Yet during certain moments of crisis, some voices within the movement justified violence against oppressive domestic rulers. The most well-known thinker is Sayyid Qutb, whose legacy extended far beyond the Brotherhood. The question of violence was also revisited in the aftermath of the 2013 military coup and subsequent repression.

Debates over violence not only prompted the wrath of the security apparatus at every stage, but they also led to internal fragmentation and divisions. While al-Banna remains the spiritual father of the movement, his leadership became contested by the late 1940s, leading to a period of “crisis and schism” before his death (Mitchell 1993, 52). The crisis of leadership became even more acute after al-Banna’s death. In the aftermath of the 2013 coup the movement once again suffered from several rounds of internal divisions. Before diving into the crisis inside the Brotherhood since 2013, the next section will provide a concise overview of the Brotherhood’s trajectory after al-Banna’s death.

The Evolution and Trajectory of the Brotherhood after al-Banna's Death

Much of the scholarship on the Brotherhood tends to focus either on the early history of the organization (Mitchell 1993; Gerges 2018; Matesan 2020; Lia 2006; El Zalaf 2024; Ghyoot 2025), or on developments after 1970 (Willi 2021; Wickham 2013; Brown 2012; Ardovini 2022; Al-Awadi 2004). How does one periodize the evolution of a movement over the course of nearly a century? One possibility is to focus on the political context in Egypt. For instance, Kennedy looks at the evolution of the group under the different presidencies, from Nasser, Sadat and Mubarak to the Arab Spring (Kennedy 2017). The Brotherhood itself speaks of its past ordeals, which include the 1948 wave of repression followed by al-Banna's assassination in 1949, and the 1954 and 1965 waves of repression. I propose to break down the evolution of the group after 1949 into several major phases of organizational development: 1949 – 1965: conflict with the state; 1965-1970: a movement underground and in exile; 1970-1983: renewal and expansion; 1984 – 2011: political forays; 2011-2013: democratic politics: and post 2013: divisions and exile.

After the death of Hassan al-Banna, the Brotherhood was in crisis: its activities were banned, Egypt was under martial law, and internally the movement faced a leadership vacuum and severe fragmentation, until a new supreme guide was elected in 1951 (Zollner 2008, 19). Under the new leadership of Hassan al-Hudaybi, the Brotherhood started collaborating with the Free Officers, who overthrew the monarchy in 1952. After the revolution, the Brotherhood expected to play an advisory role and be an influential actor in the politics of the newly established republic. This attitude antagonized the Free Officers, and especially Gamal Abdel Nasser, who refused to accept any “guardianship over the revolution” (Matesan 2020, 63). The growing tensions between the Brotherhood and Nasser culminated in an assassination attempt on Nasser on October 26, 1954, which Gerges suggests was staged by a rogue unit of the Brotherhood (Gerges

2018, 116–17). The assassination attempt prompted a severe crackdown that nearly destroyed the Brotherhood, making 1954 a watershed moment, and marking the start of a long period of brutal repression. It was during this period and largely in response to the torture witnessed in prison that Sayyid Qutb started developing more radical ideas, and became the spiritual guide of a new militant faction within the movement (Zollner 2008, 43). Gerges suggests that members of this faction started plotting to assassinate Nasser despite opposition from senior Brotherhood leaders, but they did not get a chance to carry out their plans before Nasser uncovered the plans and embarked on a new wave of repression in 1965 (Gerges 2018, 255–57, 276–79).

From 1965 to 1970, the Brotherhood was severely weakened, operating only clandestinely, with most of its members either underground or in exile. Nasser embarked on an extensive propaganda campaign that portrayed the Brotherhood as a widespread terrorist network. The movement fragmented, and al-Hudaybi tried to consolidate the Brotherhood around a gradualist nonviolent vision, which he outlined in his work *Preachers Not Judges* (Zollner 2008).

After Nasser's death, President Anwar Sadat tried to turn a new page in the government's relationship to Islamists, allowing the Brotherhood to revive itself as a movement. By 1975, members were released from prison under a general amnesty (Zollner 2008, 48), confiscated properties were returned, and the movement was allowed to resume meetings, publish, and build religious centers (Al-Awadi 2004, 36–37). The Brotherhood started entering professional syndicates, while also turning its attention to university campuses, where it started recruiting a new generation of educated and highly motivated members. At a time when the government perceived the growing leftist movement on campuses as a bigger threat than the Islamists, the rapid growth of the Islamist student movement was a welcome development (Abdo 2002, 121).

By the 1980s, the Brotherhood became one of the most influential forces on Egyptian campuses, and one of the strongest movements in civil society and professional syndicates.

This growth also attracted the attention of the powers that be, which vacillated between repression and attempts to bring the Brotherhood into the political system. Brotherhood leaders at the time resisted politicization on several occasions, such as when Sadat offered the General Guide Omar al-Tilmisani a seat on the newly formed Consultative Council in 1980 (Al-Awadi 2004, 41). Yet these opportunities prompted significant internal discussions on the role of political participation, which ultimately resulted in the decision to enter formal politics.

At first, Brotherhood leaders reaffirmed al-Banna's criticism of partisanship, seeing partisan division as tearing society apart and undermining the interests of the *umma* (Al-Awadi 2004, 39). Nonetheless, individual members could participate in elections under the banner of existing parties. They did so in 1976, securing six seats, and again in 1979, securing five seats (Al-Awadi 2004, 41). By 1983, the Brotherhood considered formal political participation through parliamentary politics, and in 1984 it participated in an alliance with the nationalist Wafd Party. Pahwa's *Politics as Worship* offers one of the most detailed accounts of the ideological debates that occurred inside the movement during this time. She shows how leaders framed politics as a practice of *da'wa* (preaching) and *tarbiya* (ethical cultivation), that would enable Brothers to model "righteous political action" and guide voters in "how to practice it" (Pahwa 2023, 48). Once elected, Brotherhood members presented their political participation as an opportunity to advocate for sharia and to practice *da'wa*.

By the end of the decade, when the Brotherhood decided to formally enter politics, the movement consolidated around the idea that political work is another tool of promoting the religious mission of the movement, and using state institutions as tools for applying God's law.

The Brotherhood promoted the idea that it must build power, and that state institutions could and should be Islamized (Pahwa 2023, 76). Whereas al-Banna called for the gradual Islamization of society, seeing an Islamic state as an outcome for a distant future, the new politicized vision that emerged called instead for a gradual Islamization of the state as an immediate priority for the near future (Pahwa 2023, 76).

The Brotherhood's forays into politics also fostered a new generation of more moderate and reformist voices, leading to internal debates and divisions along both ideological and generational lines. Wickham shows that participation in politics led both to a strategic adaptation on the part of Islamists, who started soft-pedaling their calls for sharia and allied with secular forces to push for democratic reforms, and to ideological revisions (Wickham 2013). These reformist voices adopted more democratic values and more progressive interpretations of Islam, calling not only for reforms in the political system, but also within the movement itself. As Wickham underscores, these Brotherhood members did not turn into liberal democrats, but they adjusted their understanding of what Islamic rule would mean in practice and how it should be pursued (Wickham 2013, 14). Nonetheless, by the time of the 2011 uprisings, these reformist voices inside the Brotherhood were eclipsed by the more conservative old-guard leadership that came to dominate the movement in the early 2000s. Inside the movement, these leaders placed great emphasis on organizational discipline and hierarchy. While this may have presented some benefits for mobilization during the 2011 uprising, it also became an obstacle to successful adaptation and flexibility during moments of crisis.

The Brotherhood after the “Arab Spring”

After an initial reticence to overtly participate in the planning and initial protests on January 25, by January 28th the Brotherhood called on its members to join the uprising (Wickham 2013,

162). The Brotherhood quickly became one of the most powerful mobilizing forces in Tahrir Square, and subsequently one of the most organized political forces after the fall of President Mubarak. This capacity for mobilization paid off. The Freedom and Justice Party (FJP), formed by the Brotherhood after the uprising, emerged as the largest bloc in parliament. Dr. Mohammed Mursi, the FJP candidate, won the Presidency after a runoff election against Ahmad Shafiq. In other words, by the summer of 2012, the Muslim Brotherhood became the clear winner of the Egyptian uprising.

This political victory was short-lived. As the political and economic crises intensified, resentment against the Brotherhood grew, culminating in massive anti-Brotherhood protests in Cairo on June 30th, 2013. The military promptly stepped in and ousted the Brotherhood from power on July 3rd. The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), which had been overseeing the political transition, suspended the constitution, appointed an interim president, called for new elections, took pro-Brotherhood media channels off the air, and issued arrest warrants and travel bans for hundreds of Brotherhood leaders (Willi 2021, 304). The repression following the military coup was the harshest the Brotherhood had witnessed since 1965, marking the fourth ordeal in the evolution of the group. The movement was declared a terrorist organization, its assets were frozen, and most of the leadership was either arrested or went into exile. The different tensions and cleavages that had plagued the movement since its early days all came to the forefront in the aftermath of the military coup.

The harshness of the repression prompted internal debates on whether violence would be justified. Whereas the historical leaders of the movement have remained committed to nonviolence in the realm of domestic politics, by 2015, an informal shari'a committee justified armed resistance to the state (Pahwa 2017, 1078). Most senior Brotherhood leaders invoked the

previous ordeals to promote a narrative of endurance, patience and victimhood (al-Anani 2019). This narrative held no appeal for many young members who risked their lives in Tahrir Square, and later at the sit-in in Raba'a Square, which was brutally put down by security forces in August 2013. Thus, in addition to being ousted from power, after the 2013 military coup the Brotherhood also found itself in internal turmoil, with growing divisions that gradually morphed into deep factionalism among leaders. This group splintered; first between the leaders in exile and those who filled the ranks inside Egypt after mass arrests, and later among different factions in exile. A decade after the military coup, the Brotherhood inside Egypt is nearly nonexistent, and among the Brothers in exile, there are two different factions that claim to represent the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, and a third faction that has been weakened to the point of obscurity (Affan 2024, 258).

The divisions in exile extend beyond questions of leadership and fragmentation among key figures. A key line of debate concerned the question of domestic versus transnational focus, this time prompted by the reality of repression and opportunities afforded in exile. Should leaders in exile take charge of strategic decision-making, or should that continue to rest with the imprisoned leaders in Egypt? Should the movement try to mobilize politically abroad, and if so, how? Underneath these disputes, as the Brotherhood members continued to reckon with the swift and dramatic downfall of the organization, the old deliberation around the role of politics also re-emerged with the ranks of the movement, revisiting the relationship between the movement and the party (Darrag 2017, 224). Many inside the Brotherhood want to separate the two entities, so that the party could be independent and form a clear platform, build strong cadres, and have the flexibility to act pragmatically and engage with non-Islamists (Darrag 2017, 225).

What lessons one draws from the failure of democracy in Egypt depends in large part on where one places the blame. Does the Brotherhood carry much of the fault for failing to democratize Egypt once in power, or were the structural obstacles so severe that the Brotherhood was doomed to fail regardless of its course of action? This is an issue that continues to be debated inside the movement, and that is at the heart of much of the early scholarship about the failure of the Arab Spring in Egypt. Whereas opinions vary, the consensus seems to fall somewhere in the middle. The Brotherhood made some critical mistakes, such as opting to maximize political power, pushing for a referendum to have elections before working on the constitution, and displaying authoritarian tendencies (Al-Anani 2015). Some argue the Brotherhood was too accommodating towards the “deep state” (Al-Anani 2015), whereas others suggest that the Brotherhood overestimated its public support and was too confrontational with the police, the judiciary and the military, which remained internally cohesive and ultimately held the upper hand (Hussein 2024; El-Shobaki 2013). Nonetheless, the group was also caught between a rock and a hard place, in an increasingly polarized political context that lacked a strong pro-democracy movement or autonomous trade unions and was ripe for authoritarian restoration (Lynch 2015; Hinnebusch 2018). To make matters worse, the military controlled the transition, while retaining both public support and international support, and remaining deeply entrenched in the economy (Mietzner 2014).

Since the Brotherhood’s ousting from power, scholars have shifted their attention to better understand how the movement has adapted to heightened repression and changing political circumstances both domestically and internationally (Ardovini and Biagini 2021; Lynch and Schwedler 2020). While the Brotherhood is widely seen as being surprisingly resilient by virtue of surviving this new wave of repression, scholars also recognize that the movement is no longer

what it used to be. So as the Brotherhood has fragmented and reconstituted itself abroad, analyses have also shifted towards individual responses and agency (Ardovini 2021; al-Anani 2019), and the activities and strategies of various constituencies within the movement (Biagini 2021; Ardovini 2020; 2022). Much of the focus continues to be on domestic dynamics, though there is a recognition that both exile and shifting regional dynamics play a critical role in the trajectory of the Brotherhood after 2013 (Lynch and Schwedler 2020, 10–11; Ardovini 2022).

The Muslim Brotherhood and the Contemporary Geopolitics of MENA

One of the tectonic shifts triggered by the Arab Spring was the regional realignments. Historically, Saudi Arabia has welcomed Muslim Brothers and sponsored their cause, but the threat of domestic opposition during the 2011 uprisings turned the monarchy into one of the most vocal opponents of the Brotherhood. This opposition was at the heart of the regional realignment. In the aftermath of the 2013 military coup, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) allied with the el-Sisi regime and led the international campaign for the demonization and proscription of the Brotherhood, turning drastically against Qatar. While the tensions have eased since 2021, this regional realignment has left a significant mark on both the Brotherhood and on regional dynamics.

When Nasser nearly destroyed the Muslim Brotherhood in 1965, many Islamists fled to Saudi Arabia. This was part of a broader pattern of Egyptian migration to the Gulf, where oil wealth was driving rapid development. Since the mid-1970s, Gulf states became the primary destination of Egyptian migrants, with Saudi Arabia holding the largest Egyptian diaspora (Tsourapas 2018). The Gulf states provided opportunities for many Egyptians, including Muslim Brothers, to start successful business ventures (Vannetzel and Yankaya 2019). For the Brothers in particular, countries like Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, and UAE presented not only a chance to

accumulate wealth, but also to influence social policies, educational systems and public discourse. At the time, Gulf monarchies considered Islamists “to be a helpful bulwark against pan-Arabism, which they regarded more threatening to their authority” (Freer 2018, 45). Brotherhood figures found supportive host elites, became involved in social and cultural activities, helped shaped the education systems and religious institutions in their host states, and established local branches of the Muslim Brotherhood (Freer 2018; Matthiesen 2017). In Kuwait, these local Brotherhood affiliates have been participating in parliamentary elections since the 1980s, becoming one of the most influential political forces in the country (Freer 2018, 45–46).

In Saudi Arabia, the relationship between the House of Saud and the Muslim Brotherhood started becoming more contentious in the early 1990s, when Islamists criticized the monarchy’s alliance with the United States, which resulted in the deployment of American troops on Saudi soil (Matthiesen 2017, 122). The tension between the Brotherhood and the ruling elites in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and UAE came to a boiling point after the 2011 uprisings, when Islamist opposition movements were perceived as a potential existential threat to these monarchies. Brotherhood ideologue al-Qaradawi, who was based in Doha, thought the rise of Islamists and the fall of regional tyrants was inevitable (Mabon and Menshawy 2021, 54).

Qatar continued to support the Muslim Brotherhood once it came to power, investing heavily in Egypt (Eyal 2013). Saudi Arabia and the UAE, on the other hand, helped foment domestic and international opposition to President Morsi, and supported the military coup against the Brotherhood (Matthiesen 2017, 123; Kirkpatrick 2015). After the coup, while their publics expressed solidarity towards the Brotherhood on social media, Saudi Arabia and UAE poured billions of dollars into Egypt, helping stabilize the new regime and allowing el-Sisi to pursue ambitious investment projects (Sallam 2024, 89; Mabon and Menshawy 2021, 57). Qatar, on the

other hand, continued to provide a refuge to exiled Brotherhood leaders. Saudi Arabia, UAE and Bahrain withdrew their ambassadors from Qatar in 2014, and in 2017 they were joined by Egypt in imposing a blockade on Qatar, accusing it of supporting terrorism. While the blockade ended in 2021, it nevertheless prompted Qatar to strengthen its political and economic ties with Turkey, leading to a significant regional realignment (Kabbani 2021).

Matthiesen argues that after the 2011 uprisings, the Middle East became polarized along three axes: 1) the alliance led by Saudi Arabia and UAE, 2) the alliance led by Turkey and Qatar, and 3) the “Axis of Resistance”, made up of Iran, Syria, Hezbollah, pro-Iran forces in Iraq, Houthis in Yemen and Palestinian Islamists like Hamas (Matthiesen 2022, 392–93). As Lynch and Schwedler point out, this realignment and polarization around the Muslim Brotherhood “coexisted uneasily with the broad support by several states for Islamist groups fighting against the Assad regime in Syria” (Lynch and Schwedler 2020, 11). Nonetheless, the overall effect has been that Gulf states have become much more interventionist in the domestic affairs of other countries, and Turkey has been playing a much more prominent role in regional politics, “angling to turn itself into a regional leader for “moderate” Islamist politics” (Lynch and Schwedler 2020, 10–11).

For the Muslim Brotherhood this regional realignment has meant a loss of important allies and safe havens, and an increasing vulnerability in the face of an international campaign to paint and designate the movement as a terrorist group. While Turkey has provided a refuge for many Brotherhood members and leaders, allowing the movement to rebuild abroad, its rapprochement with Egypt since 2022 has placed further restriction on the ability of the Brotherhood to mobilize from exile. Thus, a decade after the military coup, and almost a hundred years after its founding, the Brotherhood found itself in one of the most precarious situations in its history, with limited

external allies, and severe internal challenges. This is particularly striking considering the global influence that the Muslim Brotherhood has been able to achieve in the second half of the twentieth century.

The Brotherhood's Influence beyond Egypt

The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood stands out as perhaps the most influential Islamist movement of the twentieth century in large part because it has inspired the formation of Brotherhood branches throughout the world, from Morocco to Indonesia. These local Brotherhood movements have left a significant mark on the civil society and politics of their country, while in turn being shaped by local, national and regional considerations, opportunities and alliances.

Islamism as an ideology appealed to a wide variety of audiences throughout the Middle East, both during the struggles for independence and in the post-colonial period, becoming one of the main ideological alternatives to pan-Arabism and socialism. The global expansion of the Brotherhood, however, is not only a story of ideological appeal and diffusion, but also a story of migration and porous borders. By the middle of the 20th century, local branches of the Brotherhood were starting to emerge throughout the region. They were established either by Egyptian Brothers who traveled to other countries or went into exile, or by nationals who had studied in Egypt, and were introduced to the ideology and structure of the Brotherhood in Islamist student circles. Regardless of how these branches were established, they all developed as national versions of the Muslim Brotherhood, who shared an ideological affinity with the Egyptian parent organization, but whose priorities, strategies and alliances were ultimately shaped primarily by the domestic context and the policies of the various regimes. Accordingly,

the impact of Brotherhood affiliates has also varied, and their social and political weight cannot be reduced to their electoral participation and success.

The extent to which these Brotherhood branches adopted a politicized version of *da'wa* or focused on social and cultural activities depended in large part on the political context and institutional opportunities in each country. In countries like Qatar or the UAE, where there are no elected Parliaments and well-established political parties, the Muslim Brotherhood focused on charity and educational activities and did not form political parties, even though it has been able to yield significant political influence (Freer 2018). In Kuwait, on the other hand, the Brotherhood started contesting parliamentary elections in the 1980s, being able to influence policy decisions and political debates (Freer 2018, 45–46). In other monarchies, like Jordan and Morocco, the Brotherhood also established political parties, the Islamic Action Front (IAF) and the Justice and Development Party (PJD). While in Morocco the PJD managed to become part of the democratically elected governing coalition after the Arab Spring, the party suffered a crushing defeat in the 2021 elections. Yom argues that the Jordanian and the Moroccan monarchs have adopted a similar approach of allowing political participation, yet designing rules and institutions in such a way as to make the opposition look responsible for all failures, and the monarchy as indispensable for order and stability (Yom 2017). Hamid notes that after a decade in power, the PJD did not have much to show for (Hamid 2023).

The extent to which Muslim Brotherhood parties have been tolerated, co-opted or brutally repressed has also varied drastically, both across countries and across time within the same country. In Tunisia, Ben Ali cancelled the 1989 elections when it looked like they would benefit the Islamist candidates that had run as independents. He proceeded to repress the Ennahda movement, whose predecessor the Islamic Tendency Movement was originally inspired by the

Muslim Brotherhood (Marks 2017, 34). Consequently, many of the Ennahda leaders that managed to escape arrests went into exile, and revitalized parts of the movement abroad, while the repression persisted domestically. In Algeria, the military also intervened when it looked like the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) was going to come to power through elections. This sparked a brutal civil war that “cost an estimated 200,000 lives between 1992 and 1999” (Lagervall 2021, 83). In Syria, when the confrontation between the Brotherhood and the regime escalated in Hama in 1982, “the Ba’ath regime’s most loyal forces shelled entire quarters of the city and bombed many of its residential areas – leaving between 25,000 and 40,000 dead” (Lefèvre 2013, xi).

In other contexts, Islamists have been embroiled in conflicts with external actors, as has been the case in Palestine. The Egyptian Brothers established branches in Palestine in the mid-1940s. After the creation of Israel and subsequent wars, the Brotherhood in Gaza and West Bank all but disappeared, only to re-emerge in the 1970s as a charitable network. It gradually expanded the scope of its activities and flourished, especially in Gaza, where weak ideological competition from communists and nationalists, urbanization, poverty, and a growing middle class all provided a fertile ground for Islamism (Gunning 2008, 30–31). At the start of the 1987 intifada, the Brotherhood established Hamas as its paramilitary wing in order to participate in the resistance against Israel (Gunning 2008, 26). Over the years, Hamas eclipsed and took over the infrastructure of the Brotherhood, and became the predominant Islamist movement in Palestine, playing a critical role both in domestic politics and in the resistance to Israel and opposition to the peace process. While Hamas has its origins in the Muslim Brotherhood and continues to share an ideological affinity and an organizational structure modeled after the Brotherhood, it is also a distinct organization, whose armed resistance to Israel brought it closer to Hizbollah and Iran than any of the other Brotherhood branches. Distinct from Hamas, there is also an Islamic

Movement in Israel, which was inspired by the Egyptian Brotherhood's ideology and model of nonviolent activism and network of social services (Rosmer 2022).

In sharp contrast to these examples, Indonesia presents a case where after a period of successful democratization, the Brotherhood inspired Islamist party PKS has been able to participate freely in elections. The movement's grassroots base pales in comparison to the traditionalist Nahdlatul Ulama or modernist Muhammadiyah, and the party has not been able to gain more than 8.4 percent of votes in legislative elections. Nonetheless, PKS has retained a stable base of support, and played an important role through various cabinet positions and as a coalition partner.

In Western democracies, there are also Muslim organizations and networks that trace their origin to the Brotherhood, and especially the influence of Egyptian and Syrian Brothers who fled to Europe in the 1960s and 70s to escape repression at home (Bakker and Meijer 2013). These charitable networks and socio-cultural organizations all developed and evolved as national organizations serving Muslim communities and addressing local needs and concerns. With the new wave of exile from the ranks of the Egyptian Brotherhood since 2013, these Muslim organizations in countries like the United Kingdom, coexist and operate in parallel with the local offices of the Egyptian Brotherhood in exile. Nonetheless, the expansion of the Brotherhood presence in Europe has also fueled some reactionary voices in Western public discourse.

Criticisms, Controversies and Conspiracies

Since the Iranian revolution and the American hostage crisis, many Western audiences conflate Islamic revivalism with militancy, and approach Islam through the prism of exceptionalism (Cesari 2004, 3). This tendency only exacerbated after 9/11, leading “intellectuals, journalists, writers, and artists” in the West to “unashamedly express their aversion

to Islam” (Cesari 2004, 4). The global reach of the Muslim Brotherhood has further led to a variety of criticisms of the movement, some verging on Islamophobic conspiracy theories. Some of the negative campaigns surrounding the Brotherhood in Europe have been solicited and significantly funded by the U.A.E. (Kirkpatrick 2023). The nature of accusations range from claims that the Brotherhood has infiltrated policy circles in the West to fears that the movement is a hotbed of radicalization. Critics do not just see the Brotherhood as a conservative movement; they perceive it as an anti-democratic force. Some of the most radical critiques, such as those of Florence Bergeaud-Blackler, go as far as claiming that the Brotherhood plans to conquer and Islamicize Europe. Dazey’s critique of Bergeaud-Blackler points out that these arguments run counter to the larger corpus of social scientific work on the Brotherhood, and are ahistorical, reductionist and essentialist (Dazey 2024). Rather than assuming nefarious intentions, immutable goals and passive acceptance of ideas, most academic work on the Brotherhood and its expansion beyond Egypt has shown the contingency and diversity of trajectories, the evolution of ideas, the importance of context and social interactions, and the internal diversity within the movement. Along these lines, other research on Muslim communities in Europe and the United States has shown that the nationalism and secularism of Western societies have been transformed by the Muslim presence, while also transforming Islamic practices into an individualized and less public act of faith, and contributing to a “secularization of Islam”, and a rethinking of key concepts, such as democracy, secularization and human rights (Cesari 2004, 6).

Alarmist accounts of the Brotherhood are fueled by two key questions that have elicited controversy throughout the history of the movement: the question of violence, and the question of the international movement. As the discussion above has shown, the Brotherhood has a fraught history with violence. While the group is widely understood as nonviolent, at least since

the 1970s, critics highlight that their nonviolence has always been conditional and context-specific, and that it does not apply to Muslim territories deemed to be under occupation, making the condemnation of violence seem selective and tactical (Vidino 2010, 212). In line with this, Voller points out that the Brotherhood has held hard-line positions on various international issues, such as in their vehement opposition to the South Sudan separatist movement (Voller 2016). When Brotherhood supporters formed new militant groups in Egypt after the military coup, such as *Hasm* (harakat sua'id misr, Forearm Movement of Egypt) and *Liwa al-Thawra* (Brigade of the Revolution), some critics tried to portray these entities as offshoots of the Brotherhood, even though the historical leaders of the group rejected violence and distanced themselves from these groups (Long 2023).

At the heart of the debates around the culpability of the Brotherhood is the question of attribution and categorization. What counts as a Muslim Brotherhood act, and who counts as a Muslim Brother? Should the formal organization be held accountable for developments in the broader social movement? Does a violent offshoot indicate that the group can nurture radical voices, or does it reinforce the fact that the Brotherhood rejects violence and refuses to let it take over its ranks, necessitating the formation of offshoots?

The focus here has been on the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, so the clearest and strictest differentiation can be made between 1) the formal organization with its official decisions issued by the formal leaders and decision-making bodies, versus the broader social movement, and 2) between individuals who remain official members of this organization, regardless of where they reside, versus those who may be ideologically sympathetic or who may belong to the same social networks. For some critics, what's more important than the formal organization with decision-making bodies and structures in different countries, is the transnational ideological

movement “in which like-minded individuals interact through an informal yet very sophisticated international network of personal, financial, and especially ideological ties” (Vidino 2010, 39).

Yet even Vidino points out that the “operational influence exerted by the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood” over the scores of organizations created by Brotherhood members around the world is “minimal to nonexistent” (Vidino 2010, 39).

In parallel to the global network of Islamist organizations inspired by the *ikhwani* model, there is also a formal International Organization of the Muslim Brotherhood, which tends to be shrouded in secrecy, and therefore also fuels some of the conspiracy theories. This has been envisioned as a multinational organization that can coordinate among various Brotherhood branches. Yet even critics consider the international organization to be largely inactive and ineffective, primarily because other Brotherhood branches are reluctant to accept the leading role of the Egyptian leadership (Vidino 2010, 39).

The Evolution of a Research Agenda

Just as the Brotherhood evolved over time, the academic research on it has also advanced, reflecting both shifting policy concerns and changes in the discipline and profession. Brown suggests that the debates within the Brotherhood and the debates about the Brotherhood “are far less isolated from each other than they used to be,” indicating a growing sophistication of the scholarly literature (Brown 2021, 234).

When Islamists started contesting elections throughout the Middle East, a growing policy concern for Western policy makers became the question of whether Islamism is compatible with democracy. This led to a wave of scholarship on the so-called inclusion-moderation thesis, which posited that electoral participation would moderate Islamist parties, just as it had communist and conservative Catholic parties in Europe (Schwedler 2007; Wickham 2013; 2004; Schwedler

2011; Elman and Warner 2008; El-Ghobashy 2005). Underlying this argument was the assumption that Islamist movements like the Brotherhood were rational and pragmatic actors that adapt to their circumstances. This approach was compatible with social movement theory, which became a predominant framework through which scholars examined how Islamists adapted their frames, responded to political opportunities, and adjusted their tactics and mobilizing structures (Wiktorowicz 2004).

Some of the earlier attention to the moderating effects of political inclusion and radicalizing effects of repression continued to preoccupy scholars after the Arab Spring, especially considering the growing repression of the Brotherhood throughout the Middle East. The post-2011 wave of works on the effects of and responses to repression also reflect the changing theoretical lenses, increasing access to primary sources, and growing methodological sophistication of the discipline. Revisiting the early history of the Brotherhood, Ghyoot, for instance, tells the story of the first three ordeals through the lens of prison memoirs, showing the various ways in which the Muslim Brothers and Sisters made sense of the violence and brutality inflicted upon them (Ghyoot 2025). El Zalaf sheds new light on how organizational structures adapted clandestinely during the most severe episodes of repression (El Zalaf 2024), and Matesan uses process-tracing and counterfactual analysis to show why repression had contradictory effects, and what factors pushed the Brotherhood towards or away from violence (Matesan 2020).

The literature on the Egyptian Brotherhood after 2013, has revealed the varied ways in which different constituencies within the Brotherhood experience and respond to state violence, and how the new wave of repression affects internal organizational dynamics, the fragmentation of the movement, and the mobilization of different constituencies (Willi 2021; Ardovini 2022; al-

Anani 2019; ElMasry and Ketchley 2020). In some instances, access to new observational data that maps district-level pre-coup election returns to post-coup patterns of violence confirms earlier insights that political exclusion can radicalize Islamist-leaning voters (Brooke and Nugent 2020). In other instances, access to new data challenges earlier assumptions about the sources of support for the Brotherhood. For instance, looking at the early period of the Brotherhood, scholars have shown that literate, socially mobile agrarian families were key to the propagation of the early Brotherhood in rural areas (Ketchley, Brooke, and Lia 2022), and that Brotherhood branches were more likely to emerge in subdistricts connected to the railway than in areas with large European populations and extensive administrative structures (Brooke and Ketchley 2018).

One of the underlying tensions in much of the literature on Islamism is how to understand the role of religious ideas and ideology, and whether to treat Muslim Brothers as ideologues or as rational actors. Brotherhood members have noted that themselves when engaging with academics. As Darrag argues, “the inability of many analysts to understand a spiritual, faith-based motivation for the choices Islamists make, individually and collectively, represents a barrier to understanding the nature of ‘political Islam’” (Darrag 2017, 221). But here the literature has also evolved, moving from an early emphasis on pragmatism and strategic rationale to a growing emphasis on the role of ideas, and continuing salience of religious discourse and religious appeal (Pahwa 2023; Grewal et al. 2019; Masoud, Jamal, and Nugent 2016).

Social movement theory remains a relevant framework through which scholars are analyzing the Muslim Brotherhood. As this literature is moving away from the study of formal organizational structures to a focus on relationality and social interactions, it can help scholars of the Brotherhood understand the changing landscape of Islamism, especially in light of the severe fragmentation and organizational degradation of the Brotherhood after the 2013 military coup.

Yet ironically, one of the most contentious internal debates within the Brotherhood during this period has been the question of how to rebuild and restore the formal organizational structures. Some of the earliest debates from the time of al-Banna continue to animate exiled Brothers that are considering the future of the movement: What should the structure of the organization look like, and what should be the relationship between the movement and the party? Thus, as the literature on the Brotherhood advances and keeps in line with the evolution of social movement theory, it is perhaps worth coming back to earlier frameworks of analysis, and interrogating the adaptation of formal organizational structures during periods of crisis.

Conclusion

At the turn of the century, Asef Bayat argued that there has been a shift towards post-Islamism (Bayat 1996; 2007). Yet the political openings of the Arab Spring led to the temporary resurgence of Islamist parties in Egypt and beyond. This was also short-lived. After 2013, the Egyptian Brotherhood became severely weakened by both repression and by what Ayyash, ElAfifi and Ezzat call a triple crisis: an identity crisis, a legitimacy crisis, and a membership crisis (Ayyash, ElAfifi, and Ezzat 2023). The Arab Barometer nonetheless points to a growing support for religious figures, suggesting that there may be yet another return to political Islam (Arab Barometer 2023). Will there be a new dawn for Islamism, a new version of post-Islamism, or has Islamism run its course?

The answers will undoubtedly depend on how the Egyptian Brotherhood will emerge out of the post-2013 impasse. While many of its most senior leaders point to the cyclical pattern of development in the movement's history, scholars have warned against making teleological assumptions. Islamist groups are neither static nor homogenous, and they can adjust and adapt to external pressures, therefore possessing the agency to shape their future.

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- For an online archive of Muslim Brotherhood documents, see www.ikhwanwiki.com
- For Brotherhood official statements and press releases in English, see the two websites maintained by the two competing factions in exile, <https://ikhwanweb.com> and <https://ikhwan.site>

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