**The Muslim Brotherhood**

**A contested Islamist actor**

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**Abstract**

The Muslim Brotherhood (in Arabic *Jamiat al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun*) stands a great source of inspiration for Islamic revivalism throughout the world. Since its establishment in 1928, the Brotherhood confronted multiple enemies (especially political authorities in the Middle East) but eventually emerged as the forefather of contemporary Islamism. This chapter provides an overview of the historical conditions that fostered the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood and expands on the core ideological foundations of the group. This contribution then discusses the Brotherhood’s views on controversial topics, such as the role of women, nationalism and economy. This chapter also examines the causes for the existence of different methodologies among the Brotherhood branches and discusses the use of violence, *jahiliyyah* (pre-Islamic ignorance), *jihad* and martyrdom. Ultimately, this contribution unfolds current relevant debates on the Brothers stressing why they still stand as a ‘contested’ Islamist actor.

**Introduction**

*‘Allah is our objective. The Prophet is our leader. Qur'an is our law. Jihad is our way. Dying in the way of Allah is our highest hope.’*

The Muslim Brotherhood

The Muslim Brotherhood (MB or the ‘Brothers’) stands out as one of the most controversial long-living transnational Islamist groups still active today. Since Hasan Al-Banna founded the organization[[1]](#footnote-1) in 1928 in Ismailia (Egypt), bold stances against the ruling class marked the beginning of a turbulent relationship with Egyptian national authorities. As soon as the Brothers started growing, this problematic relationship did not improve. Conversely, the group was banned in numerous countries and the members started to be imprisoned, tortured and even killed.[[2]](#footnote-2)

As usually confronted with violence, the group soon developed its own armed wing, which gave birth to other groups (still associated with the Brotherhood) today considered as terror groups, such as Hamas. Over the years, the lack of centralization and unity among MB branches caused rise of different organizations currently using different methodologies, ranging from terrorism to political participation and social work.

This chapter analyses the rise of the Brotherhood and explores the ideological tenets characterising the organization as well as the factors leading to such diversification of the branches over the decades. By discussing sensitive topics through the lens of the Brotherhood, this chapter provides an up-to-date picture of this transnational group, framing it within contemporary most pressing debates on the danger it may pose.

**1.1 The rise of the Brotherhood**

As anticipated above, the Muslim Brotherhood was officially established by Hasan al-Banna in 1928 in Ismailia (Egypt). Besides being a schoolteacher, Al-Banna was a talented orator and a political activist who came from a very religious family with a strong background in Islamic jurisprudence (Orofino 2019). More precisely, the father was Sheikh Ahmad Abd al-Rahman al-Banna al-Sa'ati, a prominent Hanbali imam, *muezzin* (man who calls Muslims to prayer) and mosque teacher who had great influence over young Al-Banna (Mura 2012).

The MB founder was also inspired by the thought of Jamal al-Din al-Afgani, Muhammad ‘Abduh and Rashid Rida. These three Islamic intellectuals were active in the 19th century and all stressed the need for the *ummah* (global community of Muslims) to go back to the spirit of the ‘pious predecessors’ (*al-Salaf al-Salih*), term that gave rise to *Salafism.[[3]](#footnote-3)* In their view, it was essential to emulate the good example of the pious predecessors in order to restore the glory of Islam and to avoid the imminent Muslim decline (Frampton 2018). Al-Banna was convinced that the main source of decline for the *ummah* was Western influence on the Muslim world. This influence caused the fall of the Uthmani (Ottoman) Caliphate in 1924 after almost 6 centuries of stability and prosperity.

According to Al-Banna, Western influence on the Muslim world had also fostered the upsurge of nationalist secular élites, the rise of modernism and lack of intellectual progress (Ataman 2015; Rehnema 2008). Secularism and modernism were considered as two Western-imported concepts to the Muslim world that had done nothing but weakening the implementation of Islamic tenets on multiple fields, e.g. family life, politics and economy. As a result, Al-Banna blamed Western states for Muslims’ estrangement from Islam as a *din* (way of life) and saw European military forces as subjugating the Muslim lands by attacking the heart of their civilization: their religious and cultural heritage (Al-Banna 1978).

It was clear to Al-Banna that from the moment Muslims started to move away from the true understanding of Islam in favour of Western-fabricated concepts (e.g. democracy, personal freedoms, secularism), the *ummah* started to suffer terrible defeats: the Crusaders first, then the Mongols, the Western imperialistic powers and Zionism (Frampton 2018). Al-Banna believed that the Muslim world and the West would always be in opposition given their intrinsic nature: a materialist West and a spiritual Muslim world will never come to an understanding (Al-Banna 1975; Frampton 2018).

For this reason, Al-Banna felt compelled to act in order to protect his country and his *ummah* from the West. With these ideas in mind, Al-Banna established the MB as a religious and charitable organisation aiming at the dissemination of Islamic values and principles to the masses. The MB emerged as a popular group appealing to a diverse public including Egyptian intelligentsia, members of British camp workshops, artisans, and general masses (Shamuq 1981). The Brothers’ focus soon shifted on broader social, cultural, and political issues and their goal was to restore the role of Islam as a guide for Muslim everyday living as well as for the social and political spheres (Punkhurst 2013).

With this purpose in mind, in 1938 the Brothers established their first weekly magazine, *Al-Nadhir*. Through this regular publication, the political character of the group and its demands became very clear. Counting more than 300 branches at that time, the Brothers relentlessly attacked the West, the ‘corrupted’ Egyptian national authorities and demanded the immediate restoration of the Islamic state (Munson 2001; Friedland 2015; Nasution 2017).

Al-Banna wanted the future Islamic state to be grounded on the following principles: (a) prayer, *dhikr*, repentance, and supplication, (b) fasting, chastity, and warning against luxury, (c) *zakat* and expenditure for benevolent purposes, (d) pilgrimage, travel, journeying, discovery, and investigation of Allah’s Kingdom, (e) procurement, work, and the prohibition of begging, (f) *jihad*, fighting, outfitting fighters, and caring for their families and interests after their departure, (g) commanding the good and giving sound advice, (h) forbidding evil and intervening against perpetrators of evil, (i) the obtaining of education and knowledge by every male and female Muslim in the various disciplines of life, each one in what suits him best, (j) sound manners and behaviour and assiduous cultivation of high moral values, (k) striving for physical health and control of the senses, and (l) social responsibility of both the ruler and ruled in social welfare and obedience (Ali and Orofino 2018, p. 30; Al-Banna 1978, p. 3).

Although Al-Banna has never expanded on the Caliphate as other Islamist leaders have,[[4]](#footnote-4) the above mentioned principles had to be the pillars of the system he envisaged. These principles were far from what the Brothers were experiencing during 1940s in Egypt where confrontation with British and national authorities became unavoidable. Given the multiple verbal attacks by the MB and the growing grassroots support for the group, the government decided to dissolve the Brotherhood. This move triggered the rage of some Brothers who responded by assassinating the Prime Minister Nugrashi in 1948. The killer was Abdel Meguid Ahmed Hassan, a veterinary student at the University of King Fouad I and a member of the Brotherhood.

Although the Brotherhood leader, Al-Banna, had publicly condemned the assassination of the Prime Minister as an act of terrorism incompatible with Islam, the government retaliated against him in 1949 (Ghaffar 2010). Al-Banna was killed and his son-in-law Said Ramadan emerged as a major leader of the Brotherhood in the 1950s (Munson 2001). The Brothers soon developed their own para-military capabilities and ‘a special secret organ was sometimes under the guise of scout organisations’ (Ali and Orofino 2018, p. 31; Nazih 1991, p.133). While enhancing their para-military resources, the Brothers never shifted their focus away from welfare and soon established in Egypt a multitude of schools, hospitals, factories, business organisations (Munson 2001).

In so doing, the Brotherhood became vast and well organized, an essential welfare provider for the population competing only with the government (Friedland 2015). Even after the death of Al-Banna and despite the subsequent brutal repression, the MB continued growing and expanding throughout the world, producing a number of branches very different in terms of ideology and methodology. Some embraced reformism and parliamentary politics, others chose seclusion while a few embraced violent extremism and resulted into terrorism (Rahnema 2008).

**2. The Foundations of the Brothers’ Ideology**

As discussed so far, the Brothers emerged as a reaction against Western occupation of Muslim lands and some scholars even argue that ‘absent the West, the group would not exist’ (Frampton 2018, p.4). This argument lies on the fact that the Brothers arose as defenders of Egypt against the occupiers, as the champions of an unending clash of civilizations between the East and the West. The MB ideological foundations were defined by the founder, Al-Banna, and disseminated by the letters he wrote which soon became compulsory readings for all those who joined the group (Frampton 2018).

Al-Banna motivated the unending clash of civilization between Muslims (the ‘East’) and European invaders (the ‘West’) with specific arguments. He believed that the life and the strength of every civilization was determined by the power of its ‘spirit’. The latter was defined by ideas, values and principles that existed within the souls of the people (Frampton 2018). Al-Banna saw the West as purely materialistic while the East was spiritual: as the two civilizations were grounded on such different ideas and values, they could never come to an understanding (Vidino 2010; Friedland 2015; Orofino 2019). Not only was Al-Banna convinced of the incompatibility between the West and the East but he also believed that Western invaders aimed at the total annihilation of Muslims. This aim was pursued by a double-fold Western attack strategy against the East, i.e. military and cultural (Al-Banna 1975). While Western military attack and occupation had been evident over the decades in the Middle East, the cultural war was rather more complex to detect.

The cultural war was perpetrated by the West with secularizationas the primary weapon to assault and destroy Islam. Al-Banna believed that the Europeans were slowly importing their ‘germs’ to the heart of the Muslim world and the Muslims were unable to realize the great danger deriving from the cultural war (Frampton 2018, p. 20). This lack of understanding was lying in Muslims’ ignorance about Islam and the consequential vulnerability to secularism and cultural imperialism.[[5]](#footnote-5) For this reason, Al-Banna urged Muslims to return to the ‘path of truth’ followed by the pious predecessors as he considered Islam as a ‘comprehensive order’ to regulate all aspects of life (Frampton 2018, p.21).

With this goal in mind, Al-Banna created the Brothers to spread the *da’wah* (call to Islam) to Muslims so that they could go back to the root of their faith, which also represented their main strength and binding power across the Arab world. More precisely, the MB were created with two main objectives: 1) to set Egypt (and more broadly the *ummah* within the Arab world) free from Western domination and exploitation; 2) to establish and Islamic State where *shari’a* (Islamic law) would be the main source of regulation for all aspects of life (Frampton 2018). Al-Banna and the Brothers looked at Western system of governments with great suspicion as man-made and not grounded on divine law. Also the concept of ‘democracy’ (government of the people) was preposterous in the eyes of Al-Banna as it deprived God from His absolute authority over people and therefore went against the main Islamic principle of submission.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Al-Banna believed that the only source of regulation Muslims could abide by was *shari’a.* The latter was unique because divinely inspired and therefore encouraging Muslims to comply with their religious duties. Although Al-Banna did not theorise the details of the Islamic state he wished to establish, he was sure about some key points. Firstly, Al-Banna did not see the need to separate politics from religion as they have always been bond in Muslim history and worked well in the caliphate for centuries. More precisely, Al-Banna had in mind the Ottoman Caliphate and looked at its great achievements over the centuries as fostered by the vision of Islam as a *din* not as a religion (Al-Abdin 1989).

Secondly, Al-Banna envisaged a Caliph (supreme Muslim leader) at the head of the Caliphate he wished to restore. It is worth mentioning that the Caliph could not have absolute power but had to consult with a *shura* (literally ‘consultation’, it indicates an assembly similar to the parliament) to decide matters of public interest. Even though Al-Banna placed much emphasis on the role played by the *shura* in monitoring and advising the Caliph, he held a negative vision of political parties (Frampton 2018). Al-Banna considered the contemporary *hizbiyya* (party system) in Egypt as extremely corrupted: the parties running for power did not have any sensible political goals, nor were they representing the interests of the people.

As a result, Al-Banna saw those parties as organizations ‘corrupting the morals of the people’ interested in achieving power only for personal goals (Frampton 2018, p.25). For this reason, Al-Banna called for the elimination of the *hizbiyya*, believing that a single body of consultation (with no different denominations) could be a more united front better representative of the interests of the *ummah* (Al-Banna 1947). The end of the party rivalry would have been accompanied by important amendments to Egyptian law in order to conform to *shari’a*. In line with Al-Banna’s thoughts, the MB still consider *shari’a* asthe cornerstone on which to build a just society and a good governance:

*Shari’a*is a comprehensive way of life that seeks to create good individuals….*Shari’a* further aims to create a cooperative, supportive society based on equality, justice and mutual respect, and the establishment of good governance that focuses on serving the people, achieving justice between citizens, establishing balanced and independent international relations, seeking to establish peace and humanitarian cooperation, and affirming human rights – thus honouring the meaning of the verse: “O mankind! We have created you from a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, so you may get to know one another. Verily, the most honourable of you, in the sight of Allah, is the most pious amongst you. Verily, Allah is All-Knowing, All-Aware.” (*Qur’an*: 49:13) …thus *shari’a* awakens faith, reforms behaviour, improves the general environment of the whole society, and polishes morals, through persuasion and education, with no coercion whatsoever (The Muslim Brotherhood 2012).

This quote from the MB clearly illustrates their idea of *shari’a* as a fundamental element of every aspect of human life. Unlike the Western trend of relegating religion to private life, the Brothers consider *shari’a* as an essential element of a comprehensive *din*, the only capable of assuring equality and respect among people. To emphasise the spiritual dimension over materialistic aspects, the Brothers believe that *shari’a* should be implemented holistically in order to build institutions, a fair economic system, and a society made up of sanctified individuals who abide by Islamic principles (Ali and Orofino 2018; Orofino 2019).

For the same reasons, Al-Banna and the early Brothers believed that the comprehensive application of *shari’a* would help spreading Islamic spirit in the government: all public servants could then observe Islamic tenets and keep a respectable conduct (Al-Banna 1947). Al-Banna was harshly against bribery and nepotism, he believed that one should succeed in his career only thanks to his/her capabilities and hard work. Finally, Al-Banna and the pioneer Brothers believed that all governmental acts – including the setting of national holidays and working hours – should be arranged in accordance with Islamic rules and teachings (Al-Banna 1947; Friedland 2015).

**2.1 ‘Surely Allah will not change the circumstances of a people until they change what is in themselves’ (*Qur’an*, 13:11)**

This verse, known as *Surah Ar-Ra'd*, was used by Al-Banna in his pamphlet ‘Towards the Light’ to justify the need for a comprehensive reform of ‘the self’ in order to then reform the society and the state (Al-Banna 1947, p.6). Al-Banna, speaking on behalf of the early Brothers, was strongly convinced that the *ummah* had to acknowledge the need for significant reforms as necessary to progress in order to stop the process of decline characterizing the Muslim world after Western invasion. To do so, Muslims had to accept and implement these reforms at the individual (‘self’) level in order to see the benefits extended to the whole society and nation. Although Al-Banna envisaged reforms in every aspect of Muslims’ private and public life, the following sections will focus on three broad themes: women, economy and nationalism.

**2.1.1 The ‘women issue’**

Al-Banna referred to women as ‘women issue’ on multiple occasions (Al-Banna 1947; Frampton 2018) stating the need to for women to go through a process of purification that would promote virtue and compliance to Islamic regulations. The focus on women has always been essential for the MB in order to protect the marriage and the family unity. With this purpose in mind, Al-Banna supported gender segregation, a strict code of dressing for both sexes and a campaign against ‘ostentation in dress and loose behaviour’ (Al-Banna 1947, p.10). Gender segregation appeared essential to Al-Banna as to other traditional Islamic thinkers[[7]](#footnote-7) as sexual attraction would certainly drive men and women towards immoral behaviours, as Westerners were used to (Ataman 2015). Therefore, women had to be instructed in what was proper and acceptable, especially those women holding public positions, such as teachers and physicians (Frampton 2018).

The Brothers still believe that God created men and women differently and consequently they should have different roles. Natural and biological differences affect the diversity of their functions: Al-Banna believed that women are best suited in the house rather than men because of their natural characteristics that define their role as mothers, wives and housekeepers (Al-Banna, 1975; Ataman, 2015).

The restrictive vision of women actorship in public life has been something that has characterised the MB throughout the decades. In 2007, the Brothers distributed a draft programme for their proposed political party in Egypt, later known as the Freedom and Justice Party. The programme called for the application of *shari’a,* rejected the separation between political and religious powers and called for the exclusion of women (as well as non-Muslims) from institutional political roles (Trofimov 2009). After the Brotherhood obtained political power in Egypt and became the dominant party in 2011, in 2013 they defined the UN Declaration on Women’s Rights as ‘violating *shari’a* principles’ (Al-Arabiya 2013; Friedland 2015). In an official statement, the Brothers described the UN document as extremely dangerous:

‘This declaration, if ratified, would lead to complete disintegration of society, and would certainly be the final step in the intellectual and cultural invasion of Muslim countries, eliminating the moral specificity that helps preserve cohesion of Islamic societies’ (Al-Arabiya 2013)

The main problems related to the UN document mainly related to women freedom to go to work, travel and use contraception without first obtaining their husbands’ permission. The need for women to be submitted to male guardianship (e.g. fathers, brothers and husbands) is *a forte* in the Brotherhood’s ideology together with other practices that look barbaric through Western lens. It is the case of Female Genital Mutilations (FGM), marital rape and wife beating which are all considered illegal in the West while they are widely accepted in most of the Middle East and the Muslim world in general. The Brothers have publicly endorsed these practices even if not encouraged them (Friedland 2015). In 2010, Yusuf Al-Qaradawi – at the time described as the MB spiritual leader – was harshly criticised by the international community for a *fatwa* (authoritative but non-binding opinion on Islamic law) supporting FGM. Al-Qaradawi stated:

‘Circumcision [in this case cutting the *labia minora*, not the clitoris] is better for a woman's health and it enhances her conjugal relation with her husband and that, while it is not obligatory, whoever finds it serving the interest of his daughters should do it, and I personally support this under the current circumstances in the modern world (Al-Qaradawi 2004).

The same Al-Qaradawi also stated that a woman’s legal testimony is worth half of a male one and it should be not even taken into account for major crimes (Al-Qaradawi 2013; Friedland 2015). These significant differences – for how misogynistic might appear – were always grounded on the *Qur’an* and on the fact that Allah Himself has established them. For instance, the rules on inheritance shares (where men get double of what women do) are often quoted to prove that significant differences among genders were divinely established (*Qur’an* 4:11).

Although the Brothers maintained a very restrictive vision on women, many women sections have flourished within the MB in different countries. The ‘Muslim Sisterhood’ emerged only a couple of months after the official creation of the Brothers (in 1928) and has always stood out as a group of courageous women advocating for an Islamic revival in Egypt. While in the beginning the Sisterhood was only made up of women related to the Brothers, the group is open to everyone today. The main source of inspiration for the Sisters is Zaynab Al-Ghazali, a highly educated charismatic leader who was active during the assassination of Al-Banna (1949). She helped re-organizing the movement and put a lot of effort in getting other women involved. Al-Ghazali even faced torture and imprisonment for supporting the MB (Khalaf 2012).

Al-Ghazali’s model continues to influence and inspire the Sisters today who relentlessly work to support the Brothers (as women cannot run for high political roles) and prove to be excellent political campaigners in different countries.

**2.1.2 Nationalism and economy**

It is widely accepted that the MB were funded as a reaction to British (and more broadly Western) occupation of the Middle East. In 1928 Egypt celebrated 6 years of formal independence and yet British troops were still in the country, making it appear nothing more than a ‘veiled protectorate’ (Frampton 2018, p.12). The Muslim Brothers stood as a new force able to challenge the invaders and restore both the strength of Egypt as a nation and Islam as a *din*.

Differently from other Islamic revivalist groups, the Brothers have always had positive feelings towards nationalism.[[8]](#footnote-8) This view was imbued by the funder Al-Banna who believed that there was no contradiction between Egyptian nationalism, Arab nationalism and Islamic unity (Frampton 2018). In fact, Al-Banna believed that they were 3 overlapping circles: the Brothers loved their country and were concerned about national unity (representing the first circle). At the same time, the Brothers also cared for Arab populations as they have always played an essential role in Islam: they have been the guardians of Islam and Arabic is the language for the *Qur’an*. Therefore, Arab unity was a priority for the MB and it constituted the second circle (Abdelnasser 2011). Al-Banna believed that Arab unity was essential to ultimately restore the glory of Islam and the Islamic state, which represented the third and final circle.

As a result, starting with Egyptian nationalism and moving along with Arab unity and solidarity, the Brothers hoped to achieve Islamic unity eventually (Krämer 2014). Although the Brothers have never theorised the Caliphate in details – as Hizb ut-Tahrir did for instance – Al-Banna envisaged the restoration of an Islamic state able to cross different nations, ethnicities and traditions. Al-Banna dreamt of a Caliphate that would include all Muslims, as a grand alliance between Islamic nations (Frampton 2018).

The attachment to their nation and the will to oust the invaders also shaped the Brothers’ opinions on economy. The MB affirmed to be a ‘popular national movement’ in Egypt and promoted a model of ‘national Islamic economy’ that urgently called for the nationalisation of Egyptian companies owned by Western investors (Joint Statement of the Muslim Brotherhood and the Freedom and Justice Party 2012; Høigilt, 2014, p. 514). The main idea was that all resources had to go back to Egyptians, abandoning the early notion of Islamic socialism and praising private ownership as an essential element of Islam. This conception was motivated by the fact that private ownership was the source of *zakat* (almsgiving), *kaffara* (expiation) and inheritance, making it ideal for every Muslim (Görmü 2016).

In the beginning of their activity, the Brothers successfully established directly owned businesses, such as a spinning and weaving company, a commercial and engineering work company, and an Islamic press, which were then confiscated by the government in the late 1950s (Al-Abdin 1989; Orofino 2018). The main supporter of MB persecution and property expropriation was Gamal Abdel Nasser, an Egyptian army officer, prime minister (1954–56), and then president (1956–70). He adopted a hard line towards the Brothers that culminated in a sort of ‘Frankenstein effect’ (Görmü 2016, p. 62). During Nasser’s leadership, members of the MB who had to flee the country because of persecution eventually accumulated wealth in neighbouring countries and enhanced their business skills. As a result, once they came back to Egypt, they started to support the MB with many more resources and began to invest in welfare services, such as education, health and vocational training (Görmü 2016).

Al-Banna had in mind a specific set of economic goals that needed to be achieved by his ideal Islamic state. Among them, he advocated for the prohibition of usury and the set up of Islamic banks that would lend money with no interests. He also promoted the exploitation of neglected natural resources (e.g. uncultivated lands, mines, etc.) and placed a greater focus on social welfare. More specifically, Al-Banna stressed the need to provide jobs to unemployed people, raise the salary of junior civil servants and reduce the number of governmental posts to avoid any waste of money that could go to significant social-impacting projects instead (Al-Banna 1947).

In order to carry out this reform programme, the MB established many political parties around the world, such as the Freedom and Justice Party in Egypt (banned in 2014), the Iraqi Islamist Party, the Kurdistan Islamic Union (Iraq), the Islamic Action Front (Jordan), *Hadas* (Kuwait), the Movement of Society for Peace (Algeria), the Justice and Construction Party (Libya), the Justice and Development Party (Morocco), and *Ennahda* Movement (Tunisia). These parties do not enjoy much freedom today as from 2014 the MB started to be considered a terrorist organization by the governments of Bahrain, Egypt, Russia, Syria, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

**3. Fragmentation and differences within the Brotherhood**

Although the Brotherhood claims to be a peaceful and democratic organization rejecting the use of violence,[[9]](#footnote-9) the latter has been part of their history since the early days. The problematic relationship with Egyptian authorities convinced the Brothers to establish a secret apparatus in 1940s, which worked as the group’s armed branch (Rahnema 2008). As mentioned before in this chapter, in 1948 Abdel Meguid Ahmed Hassan decided that it was time to take some serious action against the government and killed Mahmoud an-Nukrashi Pasha, Egypt’s prime minister at that time. The government’s response arrived just a month and a half later: Al-Banna was killed in Cairo and King Farouk with his Iron Guard[[10]](#footnote-10) were accused of being behind the assassination (Zeinobia 2008). Since then, retaliation became the rule in the relationship between the Brotherhood and Egyptian authorities.

This evolution was quite unexpected when considering Al-Banna’s focus on education. The Brotherhood’s leader did not want to achieve the Islamic revival through violence but by elevating individuals on multiple dimensions, i.e. spiritually, intellectually, physically and morally (Frampton 2018). For this reason, Al-Banna defined ‘learning’ as a type of *jihad* (effort) and envisaged his group to be an educator of the masses able to enlighten the people on the right Islamic concepts (Al-Banna 1947; 1975; 1978). The importance of learning for Al-Banna stood as a response to Protestant Evangelical missionaries in the Middle East who were quite successful in disseminating the Gospel through education, posing a real threat to Islam (Frampton 2018).

Motivated by the desire to intellectually counter the dissemination of Western religious ideas, Al-Banna worked hard to create Islamic schools as the centre of the Brothers’ work to revive the glory of Islam, Arab and Egyptian unity. In so doing, the Brotherhood became the ‘vanguard of the anti-missionary movement’ (Frampton 2018, p.29) and their main target became religious proselytizing through preaching and social services. The MB network started spreading from Egypt to Jordan, Palestine, Kuwait, Sudan, Yemen, Syria, and Tunisia, keeping the predominantly Arab-based entity. The MB also started to support national organizations throughout the world, such as the Islamic Tendency Movement in Tunisia, Justice and Charity in Morocco, Hamas in Algeria, and the Movement of Islamic Youth in Malaysia (Gul 2010).

When Al-Banna died, much of his vision for the group was buried with him and a process of fragmentation took place. Scholars like Reza Punkhurst (2013) believe that the fragmentation of the Brotherhood post Al-Banna was mainly due to the lack of precise political Islamic thought within the organization. In fact, very differently from An-Nabhani (founder of Hizb ut-Tahrir in 1953), Al-Banna did not leave any specific guidelines on the methodology his group should follow over the years, nor he provided a detailed image of an alternative state structure to be pursued. The writings of Al-Banna include a wide range of letters and pamphlets where a set of needed reforms are elucidated but they still leave too much room for the implementation of different methodologies.

As the Brothers expanded and new branches were established, different positions about political participation and use of violence emerged. This variety is today represented by political parties having a parliamentary setting and calling for reformism (such as the Movement of Society for Peace in Algeria) that coexist with groups that are considered terror organisations (like Hamas), all of them included within the Brotherhood big ‘umbrella brand’. These significant differences among MB branches are also due to the fact that each cell is administered at the local level and only has weak ties with the central leadership (Roy 1994). Therefore, each section tries to carry out policies in the most convenient way for their local context (Friedland 2015; Anani 2016).

The Brotherhood has four main wings to date: the political wing, the paramilitary wing, the women’s wing, and the youth wing (Friedland 2015). All the cells that have evolved into political parties and actively participate in national political arenas form the political wing while all branches that still use violence to attack national authorities constitute the paramilitary wing. Among them the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas, which is also a political party and has won elections in the Gaza Strip.[[11]](#footnote-11) As mentioned before in the article, although senior positions are mostly filled by men, women play active role within MB but not at senior level. Finally, the youth wing is in charge of providing education, training and social activities for young people in order to build MB-inspired Islamic personalities (Ali and Orofino 2018).

**3. Sayyid Qutb: *jahiliyyah, jihad* and martyrdom**

Beside Hasan Al-Banna, Sayyid Qutb is one of the big names associated with the Brotherhood. He stands as an example of the Brothers’ purism of the early days as well as the symbol of Islamic resistance against a corrupted West (Ali and Orofino 2018). Qutb was a leading member of the MB after Al-Banna’s death between 1950s and 1960s. As the MB founder, Qutb was highly educated: he was a teacher but also successfully performed as an author, poet and Islamic theorist.[[12]](#footnote-12) Qubt had a very negative vision of both political and religious authorities of his time as he believed they moved away from true Islam to compromise with the West in every single aspect of life, i.e. education, economy, politics and religion (Qutb 1981).

Qutb also considered the impact of Western civilization as extremely negative for Muslims given the strong focus on materialism, selfish individualism and sexual immorality. Qutb shared the French Nobel-Prize winner Alexis Carrel’s thought on the West as ‘depreciating humanity’, focusing on profit and giving no importance to soul and spirit (Calvert 2009). There was no doubt that Qutb was an excellent scholar but his harsh stance against the West represented a problem for Egyptian authorities at the time. For this reason, King Farouk supported Qutb’s trip to the United States hoping that once he had experienced Western life, Qutb would change his mind. From 1948 to 1950, Qutb was sent on a scholarship to Colorado State College of Education but things did not work as expected.

While King Farouk was hoping that Qutb would come back with Westernized and with new skills useful for the government, the Egyptian scholar came back home bewildered by his American experience, publishing in 1949 his first major theoretical work of religious social criticism, *Al-'adala al-Ijtima'iyya fi-l-Islam* (Social Justice in Islam). Qutb also published *Amrika allati Raʾaytu* (‘The America That I Have Seen”) in 1950 where he admires the American scientific progress and efficiency but where he also strongly condemns American primitive stage, depravity, and lack of proper human compassion (Qutb 2000). The experience in the West harshened Qutb’s positions against it and induced him to resign from civil service, joining the MB and develop a strong militant Islamist ideology supporting the use of violence.

Qutb was the first one to declare a cultural war between Islam and the West, which was clearly set out in his major work *Milestones* (*Ma‘alim fi t-Tariq*)*.* The title itself stands as a reference to the purpose of this book: Milestones was written as a roadmap for an ‘almighty army’, a selected group of warriors that would fight to re-establish the values of Islam throughout the world. Qutb calls this group the ‘vanguard’ who will eventually be able to restore true Islam (Qutb 1981, p.27).

Undoubtedly, Milestones stands as a manifesto of Islamic activism written during Qutb’s 10-year imprisonment in Nasser’s Egypt, which culminated in Qutb’s execution by hanging in 1966. The harsh conditions Qutb experienced in jail and the ambiguous justification for his imprisonment – a vague sentence of ‘anti-government activity’- shaped the main themes of the book. More precisely, three themes are relevant for this chapter as they have inspired both vocal and violent Islamic revivalist groups around the world, i.e. *jahilyyah, jihad* and martyrdom.

Qubt was strongly irritated by *jahilyyah*, i.e. pre-Islamic ignorance usually characterizing Arab populations prior to the revelation of *Qur’an* to Prophet Mohammad (Qutb 1981; An-Nabhani 1998; 2007; Friedland 2015; Orofino 2019). Although the *jahili* (people living in the ignorance of Islam, therefore in *jahilyyah*) were usually identified as non-Muslims, Qutb applies *jahilyyah* to the *ummah* (global community of Muslims) claiming that ‘the *ummah* was living in a state of *jahilyyah* which was worse than the first state’ [before the revelation] (Qutb 1981, p.206). According to Qutb, *jahilyyah* was a cancer to fight as believed to be used by ‘imperialist agents’ to divert Muslims from their true belief (Qutb 1981, p. 98; Suarez p.40).

Qutb was convinced that the ‘vanguard’ had to set Muslim free from *jahili* society, *jahili* concepts, *jahili* traditions and *jahili* leadership to finally restore Islam. *Jahili* leaders also included Nasser who had arrested Qutb and tortured him daily until his execution. Qutb, as An-Nabhani and other Islamist thinkers of his time, was convinced that all political systems not based on *shari’a* were dangerous for Muslims: individuals living in societies regulated by manmade laws will be slaves to other men eventually rather than being free to observe their religious duties. Qutb witnessed several atrocities in prison[[13]](#footnote-13) and these facts convinced him that Islamic revival had to be achieved by all means, including violent *jihad.*

Literally ‘effort’ in word and action, *jihad* was considered by Qutb as ‘the fighting of unbelievers’, and involved all possible efforts that are necessary to dismantle the power of the enemies of Islam including ‘beating them, plundering their wealth, destroying their places of worship and smashing their idols’ (Qutb 1981, p. 232). This quite harsh approach on *jihad* was motivated by Qutb as necessary to prevent the oppression of Muslims, being *jihad* itself a tool to avoid subjugation by the *kuffar* (unbelievers). Qutb regarded *jihad* as a religious duty for all Muslims and motivate his belief by quoting a passage of the *Qur’an* known as Surat al-Baqarah:

Jihad is ordained for you (Muslims) though you dislike it, and it may be that you dislike something which is good for you and that you like something which is bad for you. Allah knows but you do not know (*Qur’an* 2:216).

Qutb re-states the importance of *jihad* as an obligation for every Muslim, whether they like it or not. The importance of the role of *jihad* was strongly depending on the need to preserve Islam as a *din,* constantly threatened by the *jahili*. Qutb argues that in *jahili* societies ‘the basic needs of human beings are considered identical with those of animals, this is food and drink, clothing, shelter and sex. It deprives people of their spiritual needs, which differentiate human beings from animals’ (Qutb 1981, p.46). For these reasons, Qutb was convinced that Islam had to be protected with every means being the only civilization based on divine revelation.

*Jihad* was certainly among the means to protect Islam and Qutb placed much importance on both the role of the *Mujahideen* (fighters) and the *Shuhada* (martyrs). Qutb was convinced that both of them would receive great rewards from Allah Himself because they were willing to sacrifice their lives for the divine cause:

Let those (believers) who sell the life of this world for the Hereafter fight in the cause of Allah, and whosoever fights in the Cause of Allah, and is killed or is victorious, We shall bestow on him a great reward *(Qur’an* 4:74).

Qutb quoted this passage in Milestones in order to emphasise the good aspects of *martyrdom* as he himself was sentenced to death by Nasser. Qutb chose not to compromise with a government he perceived as corrupt and far from Islam, even when confronted with death. In fact, it is very probable that Qutb was aware of execution when he finalized the last pages of Milestones where martyrdom is described as a crucial part and final price of *jihad*. More precisely, in the last chapter of the book (‘This is the Road’) Qutb refers to the story of the ‘Makers of the Pit’ (*Qur’an* 85:4-8). This passage tells about a group of Muslims (‘Believers’) who loved Allah and openly proclaimed their faith who were then imprisoned and tortured by tyrannical enemies:

They intended to deprive man of that dignity which has been bestowed upon him by Allah Almighty and without which he is reduced to a mere plaything in the hands of tyrants, to be tortured, burned alive, and provide entertainment to his tormentors by his cries of agony (Qutb 1981, p.166).

Qutb’s words certainly resonate his own experience and his struggle against the *jahili* forces who were detaining him. Although these believers were exposed to terrible pain and eventually death, they were victorious in the eyes of Qutb as they kept their faith and therefore Allah’s favour:

And never think of those who have been killed in the cause of Allah as dead. Rather, they are alive with their Lord, receiving provision, rejoicing in what Allah has bestowed upon them of His bounty, and they receive good tidings about those (to be martyred) after them who have not yet joined them – that there will be no fear concerning them, nor will they grieve (*Qur’an* 3:169-171).

These verses – quoted in Milestones right after the ‘Makers of the Pit’ - are imbued with the good reasons of martyrdom, the importance of keeping the faith even through harsh time and the rewards coming from Allah for the eternity. Martyrdom was highly important for Qutb also because he had a long term vision: he believed that his words would be ‘stronger if they killed him’ and he was absolutely right. Qutb’s execution was indeed perceived as martyrdom not only by the members of the Brotherhood but also by other Muslims. Not only Qutb ideas became the cornerstone of the MB armed wing, but they also constituted a substantial part of the manifesto of almost any other Islamist group formed after the Brothers all over the world.

**4. Conclusion: current debates**

Having discussed the history, the ideology and the evolution of the group into different wings, it is easy to understand how hard is to label the MB as ‘non-dangerous’ or vice-versa as a ‘terror group’. Undoubtedly, Al-Banna’s and Qutb’s ideas have influenced modern and contemporary Islamic revivalist groups, including some militant terror organizations like Al-Qaeda. In fact, it is well known that Al-Qaeda manual for *jihad* was strongly inspired by Qutb’s Milestones (US Department of Justice 2002). Furthermore, Al-Qaeda current Amir (Ayman al-Zawahiri) was a member of the Egyptian MB in his youth (Counter Extremism Project 2019). Not only al-Zawahiri but also Bin Laden had ties with the Brotherhood: he was a member of a MB branch in the Arabian Peninsula and he was much appreciated by some of the Brothers in Egypt. When Bin Laden died in 2011, the Egyptian MB defined him as the ‘sheikh’ (honorific title) who had led resistance in Afghanistan (Joscelyn 2012).

Some sources also point out that the MB were behind the creation of Al Taqwa Bank in the Bahamas in 1988. This bank stood as the main financial institution supporting multiple terror organizations like Hamas, the Islamic Salvation Front, and al-Qaeda (Counter Extremism Project 2019a). Over the last few years, the US have been very hard on the Brotherhood: in 2015 a bill (known as the ‘Muslim Brotherhood Terrorist Designation Act’) was introduced with the approval of both Houses of Congress (US Congress 2015). This bill designates the MB as a ‘foreign terrorist organization’ leading to further investigations on the activities of the group and on its members. In 2017, the State Department eventually decided that the MB was not a terror group as it did not meet specific requirements, such as the regular use of violence and a unitary structure (Benjamin and Blazakis 2019).

Although in 2019 Donald Trump re-stated the need to ban the MB in the US, the group has still not been proscribed. Given the lack of unity among the different branches of the group (also called ‘chapters’) and even between different cells of the same national branch, it is quite hard to assess the actual danger posed by the group in a specific country. A future ban of MB branches would certainly resonate as unjust for those ‘chapters’ affiliated with democratic forces and committed to enhance welfare. As mentioned early in the chapter, this is the case of the MB affiliation with the Tunisian party *Ennahda* (the Renaissance Party), which has been defined by its founder Rached Ghannouchi as a party leaving ‘political Islam and entering democratic Islam’ (Middle East Eye 2016). Ghannouchi defined his party as ‘Muslim democrats’ happy to advocate for the full implementation of democracy in Tunisia and to separate religious activity from political one.

Besides *Ennahda*, the Brotherhood has also been very popular for its notable social programmes for the needy. In Egypt, the organization runs 22 hospitals, several schools in each province as well as various care centres for poor widows and orphans (The New Humanitarian 2006). The Brothers are committed to reach out to the marginalised people in the society hoping to improve their living conditions for everyone. That is why they also offer training programmes for the unemployed and most of their services are open to all Egyptians regardless of their religious affiliation (The New Humanitarian 2006). Interestingly, even MB-related terrorist organizations have kept social care as one of their main characterizing elements.

As discussed above, this is the case of Hamas, notably a terror group founded by the MB in 1987 after the beginning of the First Intifada to fight Israel and its occupation of Palestine.[[14]](#footnote-14) Over the years, Hamas has perpetrated frequent suicide attacks against Israel, affecting the civilian population. At the same time, and in perfect harmony with the MB’s focus on social programmes, Hamas runs many support programmes for the people of the Gaza Strip and has built hospitals, schools, and libraries throughout the area. As a result, Hamas has achieved widespread support among locals (Orofino 2019).

Undoubtedly, the MB still represent a very contested Islamist actor as they have indeed multiple facades. On the one hand, the Brothers’ role as social care provider for the needy has always worked as a catalyst for Muslim solidarity and has attracted the affection of the local Muslim community wherever the group is based. On the other hand, the Brotherhood ties with extremely violent groups (such as Al-Qaeda) has negatively impacted public opinion and national authorities all over the world. While the debate on the future of the Brothers is far from conclusion - both in the West and in the Muslim world -it is sensible to assume that they will keep being considered as a ‘political problem’ – rather than a social one – for political forces opposing their ideology and fearing their influence. As a result, it is assumable that the Brotherhood will continue to be a very contested Islamist actor that, although lacking unity, still holds very powerful ideas.

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**Keywords: The Muslim Brotherhood, Extremism, Terrorism, Jihad, Jahiliyyah**

1. In this chapter the terms ‘group’ and ‘organization’ are used as synonyms. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The MB is currently banned many countries including Syria, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Russia. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Salafism is a branch of Sunni Islam that stresses the need to emulate the ‘pious predecessors’ (first three generations of Muslims after Prophet Muhammad) as much as possible in as many spheres of life (Wagemakers 2016) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For instance, An-Nabhani – founder of the Islamist group Hizb ut-Tahrir – has much theorised about the Caliphate and even wrote a constitution for the future Islamic state (see chapter on Hizb ut-Tahrir). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Cultural imperialism stands as type of Western cultural hegemony that aims to subjugate Muslims by the continuous endorsement of practices and beliefs that contradict Islamic principles (Orofino 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The word ‘Islam’ means submission. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See Taquiddin An-Nabhani in the chapter devoted to Hizb ut-Tahrir. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. An example is again the group Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT) that has always expressed negative views on nationalism. Since the early days, HT considered nationalism as a Western product dividing Muslims rather than binding them together. In fact, HT members believe that Muslims’ main source of identity should be Islam as a *din* (a way of life) rather than a nation state. Therefore, the focus for all Muslims should be the wellbeing of the *ummah* (the global community of Muslims around the world) rather than the nation (see chapter on HT). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See the MB official statements on their website <https://www.ikhwanweb.com/> [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The Iron Guard was a royalist political movement formed in Egypt in the early 1930s and often employed by King Farouk for his personal goals, including political vendettas (<https://www.jstor.org/stable/217848?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents>). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Hamas as a party won the Palestinian legislative elections on 25 January 2006 and administered the Gaza Strip until 2014 and again from 2016 (Ali and Orofino 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Qutb wrote more than 54 books (24 published) and almost 600 articles on various topics, e.g. politics, education and the Muslim world (Esposito 1998). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Including the murder of many MB members by prison guards. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. The First Intifada is the name given to the first Palestinian uprising against the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. The first uprising lasted from 1987 until 1991. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)