The Muslim Brotherhood

The Muslim Brotherhood

Ideology, History, Descendants

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Part III Descendants

Preface

It happens every so often: accusing politicians or other prominent public figures of 'supporting' or 'having ties to' the Muslim Brotherhood. In America, perhaps the best-known example of this is Huma Abedin, who held several senior positions on Hillary Clinton's staff, including as vice-chair of the latter's 2016 presidential campaign. In 2012, several Republican politicians questioned Abedin's loyalty and reliability because of her alleged ties – through family members and in other ways – to the Muslim Brotherhood and wondered whether she should receive security clearance. These claims were later debunked as conspiracy theories, however, and widely rejected by both Democrats and Republicans.

Such accusations are certainly not limited to America and can also be found in European countries. In the Netherlands, for instance, Kauthar Bouchallikht, a member of the GroenLinks ('GreenLeft') party elected to parliament in March 2021, was accused of having ties with the Muslim Brotherhood through her former position as vice-chair of the Forum of European Muslim Youth and Student Organizations (FEMYSO). Ihsan Haouach, a Belgian politician, found herself in a similar situation in July 2021 when it became known that she had given a talk, in 2019, to the European Forum of Muslim Women (EFOMW), another group supposedly tied to the Muslim Brotherhood. Both denied having connections to the organization.

Quite apart from the question of whether or not these politicians sympathized, or still sympathize, with this organization, these incidents made abundantly clear that many apparently see the Muslim Brotherhood as somehow undesirable. Politicians, journalists, commentators and people writing on social media frequently claimed that the Muslim Brotherhood is in favour of jihad and would like to (violently) impose the Sharia, sometimes with reference to the early ideologues of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. Even some of the people who defended those accused of having ties to the organization and who dismissed these charges as Islamophobic or conspiratorial thinking apparently took it for granted that the Muslim Brotherhood was, indeed, a group one would not want to be associated with.

What is the Muslim Brotherhood and what is so frightening about it? Does this organization actually incite violence through military jihad? Does it really want to impose its will on both Muslims and non-Muslims in the form of the Sharia? How does the organization relate to groups like Al-Qaida? Is there a difference between the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, where the organization was founded almost a century ago, and the situation

in European countries? This book answers these and other questions. It does not seek to defend the Muslim Brotherhood, but instead to explain and contextualize it, as well as to provide nuance to a discussion in which this is often sorely lacking.

This is not an academic publication and, as such, it contains little new information that cannot also be found in other, scholarly works. This book, by contrast, is intended for a broader audience, particularly for people who are professionally interested in the Muslim Brotherhood, such as policymakers and students taking courses on history, the Middle East, religion and political science. I have therefore refrained from using Arabic sources as much as possible. Instead, this book seeks to address an apparent need for reliable information on the transnational Muslim Brotherhood. As such, it is intended as an introduction to those who know little about the organization, but – through the numerous references – it can also serve as a good starting point for research.

Acknowledgements

Under normal circumstances, this would be the place to thank my colleagues in the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at Utrecht University for the collegial and friendly atmosphere they provided while writing this book. The truth is, however, that this book was not written under normal circumstances, but during the corona pandemic that has swept the world since 2020. This meant that I hardly saw my colleagues during the period in which I conducted research for and wrote this book, except via Teams or Zoom. Although I have recently been able to actually meet my colleagues and teach offline again, I can only hope that the world will be in better shape once this book is published than when it was written.

greatly appreciate their contribution and would like to thank them here. Although the book has improved because of their insights, it goes without saying that all remaining errors are my responsibility.

Finally, while this book might have seen the light of day without the wonderful jazz that I surround myself with every day by listening to, for example, accujazz.com, it would certainly have been a much less pleasant experience. This is even more true, of course, regarding the support I received from my family during this project. Writing a book often means working long hours, at least if one wants to keep it going, and the months in which this book was written have been no exception. Fortunately, my wife was always patient and understanding whenever I was up late at night working on this project. She has also made an invaluable contribution to the manuscript by lending me her wireless keyboard when the letter 'd' on my laptop suddenly gave up. It is because of her patience – and because of the fact that, thanks to her, this book is not about 'the Muslim Brotherhoo' but about 'the Muslim Brotherhood' – that I dedicate this work to her. I hope she is as happy as I am that the long working days will be over for a while.

Introduction

The Koran refers to Muslims as 'brothers' several times. Sura 3:103, for instance, states: '[...] remember God's blessing upon you when you were enemies, and He brought your hearts together, so that by His blessing you became brothers (*ikhwanan*) [...]'.[1] This seems to be a reference to the pre-Islamic situation in the seventh century CE, in which inhabitants of the Arabian Peninsula often fought each other because of their tribal conflicts, but were unified through the arrival of Islam. This verse may suggest that the message of the Prophet Muhammad (570–632) brought about a period of harmony and peace in which his followers conducted themselves as 'Muslim Brothers', but this was often not the case in practice. Not only did internal conflict quickly rear its head after the death of the Prophet, but the various Islamic empires that succeeded each other throughout history were often also each other's competitors.

Verses like the one mentioned above nevertheless seem to show that unity was the goal Muslims should strive for. The organization that is the focus of this book – the Muslim Brotherhood – may have wanted to hint at this ideal with its name.[2] Ironically, however, the Muslim Brotherhood has turned out to be an important source of division: both among Muslims and non-Muslims, there is much resistance against its use of Islam as a politically and socially relevant ideology, its activism and its specific ideas, while the organization simultaneously has millions of supporters around the world. In addition, the Muslim Brotherhood itself – as we will see in the chapters to come – is also strongly internally divided on several issues. Finally, academics are not united in their analysis of the organization: some see the Muslim Brotherhood as a dangerous group that differs only marginally from terrorist organizations such as Al-Qaida, while others see it as a flexible, pragmatic and democratic club that can make a constructive contribution to the politics of the countries in which it operates.

To clarify these different academic positions on the Muslim Brotherhood, this introduction will first deal with the scholarly debate about Islamism, the trend that the organization is part of and that is known under various names. We will subsequently look at the different points of view that academics have with regard to the Muslim Brotherhood. Finally, I will give an overview of what the reader can expect in the chapters to come. The goal of this book is not just to give an overview of the various expressions of the Muslim Brotherhood in different Arab and European countries, but

also to show that stereotypes about the organization do not do justice to the gradual, organic and ideological developments that it has gone through over the past decades.

Islamism as a Concept and as a Phenomenon

The term 'Islamism' refers to the idea that Islam, apart from being a religion of rituals, beliefs and texts, is also a politically and societally relevant ideology that forms the basis for activism. In practice, this is expressed in the idea that Islam should not just be applied in the religious sphere, but also in the political and societal spheres, mostly by implementing the Sharia. So, whereas Islam can be limited to the private sphere, Islamism is something that is, by definition, also related to the public sphere. For this reason, Islamism – much more than Islam itself – touches upon the lives of others.

The effects of Islamism on the public sphere and the possible tensions that emanate from them are probably also the reason that several labels for Islamism underline politics and society. One of these is 'political Islam', a term that emphasizes the politically relevant aspect of Islamism.[3] Other terms more or less embody the activist aspect of Islamism: 'Islamic extremism',[4] which is usually tied to violence (and is regularly used in the media), the more neutral 'Islamic revival',[5] the less common 'Islamic reformism/ modernism'[6] (because Islamism is a modern reformist movement), 'militant Islam'[7] or the often-heard 'radical Islam'.[8]

Although none of these terms is perhaps entirely incorrect, each one of them is lacking in some respect: political Islam suggests that Islam itself is a-political, which is doubtful; extremism is rather a subjective term; revival is somewhat vague and may refer to a much broader phenomenon and is therefore less applicable; reformism/modernism is easily confused with more progressive trends within Islam; militant Islam seems to imply violence; and radical Islam does not take into account that Islamists often take a gradual approach and, in some contexts, have left the opposition and have attained power (and are therefore not so radical), as we will see in later chapters.

Academics are perhaps even more divided about the use of the term 'fundamentalism' in Islam as an alternative to Islamism. Apart from the fact that this term has a reputation for being associated with things like fanaticism,[9] some researchers reject the term because it has roots in Protestantism and is not indigenous to Islam[10] or because it seems to accept as true the claim that Islamists are the ones who go back to the 'foundations' or 'fundamentals' of

the faith.[11] Other academics do use the term fundamentalism with regard to Islam. They state that fundamentalism, with its rejection of 'passive' and 'tainted' conservatism in favour of an activist return to the 'pure' faith (perhaps linked to a specific historical period) and the political and societal application thereof, are typical of Islamism.[12]

Just like the latter group of scholars, I believe that the term fundamentalism – separated from its negative image and coupled with a specific approach to a religious tradition – can be applied to Islam, particularly if that also includes groups other than the Muslim Brotherhood.[13] Still, the description of fundamentalism as given above does not entirely fit the Muslim Brotherhood's gradual and flexible approach that we will see in the chapters to come.[14] That approach is characterized much more by the image described before, of an ideological form of Islam that is applicable in politics and society; in other words: Islamism.[15] Moreover, this book is not about Islamic fundamentalism in general, but only about the Muslim Brotherhood, an organization whose members label themselves *Islamiyyun* ('Islamists') in Arabic, to distinguish themselves from *Muslimun* ('Muslims').[16] In this book, the term Islamism will therefore be used to indicate the broader ideological trend of which the Muslim Brotherhood is also part.

Yet Islamism is more than a concept. The word also represents a phenomenon about which academics wonder how exactly it should be interpreted. This, too, has led to division. Various approaches of reading Islamism can be distinguished, which we can roughly divide into three categories. A first approach is one that sees Islamism primarily as anti-modern and describes it as a phenomenon stemming from resistance to modern (Western) developments in the cultural, technological, political and societal spheres. Particularly when this is tied to secularization, Islamism is said to be a response to encroaching modernization in Muslim countries. Although scholars use (elements of) this approach, it has also been criticized because of its somewhat essentialist character and its apparent lack of attention for context.[17]

A second academic approach to Islamism is its treatment as a protest movement, such as those that also exist in non-Muslim countries. In this approach, Islamism may have its own, contextualized form, but it is simultaneously part of broader trends that are not limited to the Muslim world. As such, Islamism has been compared to communism and fascism,[18] but it is sometimes also seen as the anticolonial movement that resisted British and French rule in the Muslim world in the twentieth century or that employs today's reality in developing countries to turn against the West.[19] A different perspective within this approach is to consider Islamism as an alternative

to the economic, political and social crises that people find themselves in. Wherever (relative) poverty, repression and exclusion are prominently present, Islamism is said to be an alternative to the systems from which these emanated.[20] Although this approach, unlike the first one, pays great attention to the contexts in which Islamism develops, it has been criticized for its lack of attention for the role of Islam.[21]

A third way academic scholars approach Islamism – based on the idea that it is a diverse phenomenon – tries to look at it from all the perspectives mentioned above. As such, Islamism is seen as a dynamic and heterogeneous movement that tries to offer solutions to both internal and external challenges[22] and for whom both cultural resistance against (Western) modernity and socio-economic considerations can be important.[23] In this approach, both contextual factors – for example, the extent to which people are able to mobilize or the political structure of a country – and ideological influences are taken into account by treating Islamic movements as social[24] movements.[25] Because of its complete and nuanced treatment, this book also follows this third approach.

The Muslim Brotherhood as an Object of Study

Just like Islamism in general, the Muslim Brotherhood as a specific organization has also been the subject of academic study for decades. Partly related to the positions on Islamism given above, we can also see different trends here. We can roughly distinguish four different approaches. The first of these clearly draws a connection between the Muslim Brotherhood, on the one hand, and terrorist organizations like Al-Qaida, on the other. The attempts by American and European politicians to criminalize the Muslim Brotherhood or to have it listed as a terrorist organization by their governments have gone on for years,[26] but a similar tendency can also be discerned in academia. As such, some researchers portray the Muslim Brotherhood as an organization that is bent on grabbing power and merely refrains from using violence out of tactical considerations.[27] Others point to the alleged ideological similarities between the Muslim Brotherhood and Egyptian terrorist groups[28] and Al-Qaida,[29] paint the organization as a terrorist wolf in sheep's clothing,[30] as a group that cooperates with terrorist organizations[31] or even as a group that 'has operated as a terrorist entity for almost a century'.[32]

The second approach in the academic analysis of the Muslim Brotherhood, which can somewhat overlap with the first, sees the organization mostly as

an unchangeable group for which a strict reading of the Koran and the Sunna and a severe application of the Sharia are and will remain decisive.[33] One element that is often discussed in this approach is the allegedly fundamentally undemocratic character of the Muslim Brotherhood.[34] Another theme we encounter among adherents to this view is that the organization wants to establish an Islamic theocracy on the basis of the Sharia in individual countries or even the entire world.[35]

The third trend does not actually represent an academic point of view, but is nevertheless important to mention because it can frequently be seen in media sources about the Muslim Brotherhood and sometimes even in books professing to be serious. This concerns the idea that the Muslim Brotherhood is an international conspiracy against the West and that the organization has a secret agenda, which it has cunningly concealed. These types of accusation against the Muslim Brotherhood in popular and media sources have been analysed in various academic publications[36] and still occur, for example in a Dutch newspaper article about the alleged influence of Islamists in local politics in Rotterdam. This article labels one of the persons involved 'a spider in the Islamic web' and refers to the 'tentacles' of the Muslim Brotherhood that 'reach into the town hall',[37] suggesting that we are dealing with a central and controlling power. The organization is described in similar fashion in a recent book, which explicitly calls the Muslim Brotherhood a 'conspiracy'.[38] Thus, some groups 'have taken on different names in order to conceal their links to the leading organisation in Egypt'.[39] Moreover, the author views the Muslim Brotherhood as a dangerous organization that – through guidance from Qatar and Turkey – extends its 'tentacles' and whose presence in the West is labelled a 'beachhead' and a 'Trojan horse'.[40]

The fourth and by far the most common approach among academics who have done research on the Muslim Brotherhood is one that starts from the idea that the organization has a pragmatic, dynamic and flexible character. This expresses itself in, among other things, its ability to adjust to the systems of the countries in which it is active, its acceptance of the rules of the political game, its urging of regimes to adopt democratic and constitutional reforms and its susceptibility to the wishes of the peoples from which it sprang. Within this academic trend, this conclusion has been drawn with regard to the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt,[41] Jordan,[42] Morocco,[43] the Palestinian territories,[44] Syria[45] and Tunisia,[46] to name just a few countries that will be dealt with in this book. This is not to say that adherents to this trend believe the Muslim Brotherhood has become a liberal-democratic organization, but that they acknowledge the actual,

organic, intensely discussed and ideologically underpinned changes within the Muslim Brotherhood. This book has also been written on the basis of this approach.

Overview

As indicated before, this book is intended for professionally interested readers, not for academic specialists of the Muslim Brotherhood, and provides a detailed overview, be it as an introduction or as the basis for further research. For that reason, this book is overwhelmingly based on secondary literature and the number of Arabic sources has consciously been kept to a minimum. As a result, the book enables the broadest possible audience to actually look up the works cited in the notes and use them for further study. At the same time, this book is structured in a way that facilitates readers looking up specific information on, for instance, the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria or learning something of the relationship between the organization and Al-Qaida, but that also sketches the development of the Muslim Brotherhood in general and deals with related debates.

The book is divided into three parts. Part I deals with the theme of 'Ideology' and delves into the earliest ideas of the Muslim Brotherhood in two chapters. Chapter 1 has the general ideology of the organization as its subject and it analyses where the Muslim Brotherhood's ideas come from and how they are rooted in nineteenth-century reformist thought. It subsequently deals with the organization's ideas on Egypt and the view of the West among the earliest ideologues of the Muslim Brotherhood. Chapter 2 deals with the ideology of the organization regarding three themes that will recur throughout this book, namely, the state, political participation and societal rights and freedoms; or, to be more specific about the latter, the position of religious minorities, women's rights and civil liberties.

Part II (History) deals with the historical development of various Muslim Brotherhoods in a series of nine Arab countries, divided into three themes, each of which has a dedicated chapter. Chapter 3 has 'Repression' as its theme and deals with three countries in which this was an important part of the Muslim Brotherhood's history: Egypt, Syria and Saudi Arabia. The theme of Chapter 4 is 'Participation' and it deals with the Muslim Brotherhoods in Kuwait, Jordan and the Palestinian territories, precisely because those have been given the space to participate in the political system. Finally, in this part, Chapter 5 examines the theme of 'Power', and features analysis of the Islamist organizations that have actually attained power in, respectively, Sudan, Morocco and Tunisia.

Part III of this book delves into what I refer to as 'Descendants' of the Muslim Brotherhood: groups and trends that, strictly speaking, are no longer part of the Muslim Brotherhood, but that somehow – directly or indirectly – stem from or are connected with the organization. Chapter 6 zooms in on the 'radicals', who strive for drastic political and societal changes: the transnational Hizb al-Tahrir; the Palestinian Islamic Jihad; Tanzim al-Jihad and Al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya from Egypt; as well as Al-Qaida and the Islamic State. Chapter 7, by contrast, deals with the 'Liberals': those who have shown a greater ideological flexibility than the Muslim Brotherhood itself has often done. In this chapter, I deal with, respectively, the *wasatiyya*-trend, post-Islamism and an example of the latter – the so-called ZamZam-initiative. Finally, the focus of Chapter 8 is the Muslim Brothers as 'Europeans' and analyses the migration of the Muslim Brotherhood from the Middle East to Europe, the expressions of the organization in five European countries (Great Britain, France, Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands) and how these developments have been ideologically justified.

In the conclusions of each of the chapters in Part II and III, I will deal with one of the alternative approaches to the Muslim Brotherhood as they have been distinguished above. Concretely, this means that I will examine the view of the Muslim Brotherhood as a (potential) terrorist organization in Chapters 3 and 6, analyse the image of the group as theocratic and anti-democratic in Chapters 4 and 7 and I return to the idea of the Muslim Brotherhood as an international conspiracy in Chapters 5 and 8. That way – and in the conclusion of the book as a whole – it not only becomes clear why I have chosen the fourth approach to the Muslim Brotherhood myself, but also why this is the only one that does justice to the ideological, historical and geographical development that the organization has undergone over the past century.