
Egyption People
Thanks All Countries
against military coup

The Truth about the Muslim Brotherhood

The True Face of the Muslim Brotherhood Is That of a Totalitarian Extremist Organization, Historically Prone to Violence, and an Incubator of Present-day Terrorism

By Abdel Monem Said Aly

For the better part of two decades, a debate has raged in American research and policy circles about whether the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt is a moderate political force that could enhance a democratic and liberal process in the country. Having sporadically engaged in this debate, I have often argued that the Muslim Brotherhood's political program—a document that was never officially made public but was given to a select number of writers and opinion makers for comment, including the author, in 2007 for review and comment—reflects its true nature as a radical theocratic political organization that is far removed from democracy or liberalism.

In 2018, the Muslim Brotherhood continues to be the same radical, theocratic organization that it was since its foundation in the second decade of the last century. The only change is that the debate about the true nature of the movement continues against the backdrop of the dramatic developments that have unfolded in Egypt since the January 25 uprising of 2011, during which the Muslim Brotherhood succeeded in attaining near-complete political control of Egypt's legislature and executive power in 2012–13. Consequently, the debate about the nature of the movement, its purpose, and its relationship to terrorism, has acquired a renewed salience.

Revisiting the Debate on the Brotherhood's Political Islam

The debate about political Islam emerged in many ways as an outgrowth of a prior debate regarding the sources of terrorism in the wake of the attacks on September 11, 2001. Both debates have focused on the roots of violence and terrorism emanating from the world of political Islam, which encompasses both Al-Qaeda and the Muslim Brotherhood (MB). These debates

◁ Blood-stained Egyptian flag flutters over a protest of Muslim Brotherhood supporters, Cairo, July 8, 2013. *Mohamed Abd El Ghany/Reuters*

raised questions that have been the subject of ongoing controversy among observers and critics of the Brotherhood.

What place does the Muslim Brotherhood occupy in the context of political Islamist movements? To what extent is the Brotherhood distinguishable from militant groups such as Al-Qaeda? Is the Brotherhood itself a terrorist and violent organization or something different? If incorporated into a process of political democratization, can the Brotherhood moderate its views and eventually constitute a force for liberalization and political pluralism?

Two schools of thought have since emerged on both sides of this debate, one that emphasizes the overall sociopolitical context as the dominant factor influencing the ideological and political trajectory of the Brotherhood, and another that focuses on the core ideological makeup of the movement that has remained relatively unchanged since its foundation.

The first school of thought views terrorism as essentially a symptom of deeper root causes related to the dysfunctions of the state in the Middle East which exhibits underlying "grievances" that if pervasive will generate terrorist groups. This approach can be termed the "Root Causes Theory." Proponents of this theory often criticize ruling regimes in the region as using the threat of terrorism to avoid demands for democratization and political reform. The exact nature and scope of the root causes differ from one proponent to another, from socioeconomic factors, cultural and ethnic divisions, to repression and violations of human rights. However, all root causes constitute factors that are conducive to the rise of terrorism and political extremism, of which movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood are an outgrowth.

The second school of thought emphasizes the role of ideas and values in motivating individuals and organizations to act violently and resort to terrorism to achieve ideologically inspired objectives. Similar to the way in which Nazism and fascism had emerged as byproducts of Western political thought in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the second school of thought posits that radical Islamism derives its intellectual and ideological origins from centuries-old traditions of Islamic political thought.

Political Power in the Ideological World of Islamism

Three political theories have dominated Islamic political thought about the origins of power and legitimate authority that emerged following the death of the Prophet Mohammed.

The first theory was founded on the belief that power should be vested in the family of the Prophet or "the People of the House," *Ahl Al-Bait*, a belief which constitutes the foundation of the Shia. Despite myriad divisions that exist within Shiism about which line of political succession from the Prophet should be vested with political

authority, the major point here is that the message of Islam had come to Mohammed because of the traits of his family and clan, and therefore that his closest kin are best suited to maintain the purity and righteousness of his call.

The second major theory of Islamic political thought argues that power should be vested in those who are capable of ruling by virtue of the size of their following, their ability to maintain group cohesion or *assabia*, and their ability to wield and command military power. Those were called *Ahl Al-Sunna Wa-l-Gamaa,* or the people of Sunna and community. In short, Sunni Islam established that governance should be in the hands of rulers who are guided by the Quran, and the sayings and behavior of the Prophet, and finally what the community of Muslims decide. Arab sociologist Ibn Khaldun emphasized *assabia* as the source of ruling and governance. The Umayyad and Ottoman Caliphates translated this theory to reality.

Alongside Sunnism and Shiism, a third political tradition emerged within Islamic thought arguing that power should not be vested according to the bloodline to the Prophet, nor should power be given to those who could rule through force. Rather, political power is the prerogative of God alone, and those who do not rule by the word of God are infidels. Adherents of this tradition became known as *Khawarij*, or rebels. Belonging neither to the Sunni nor Shia sect of Islam, the Khawarij coalesced into a dissenting third party which established the doctrine of *Al-Hakimia*—a political creed which emphasizes that political power belongs to none other than God. As the word *"Khawarij"* denotes, it is a group that rebelled against that political order that emerged from both Sunnism—the Caliphate—and Shiism—the Imam.

For centuries, the divisions between these three traditions of Islamic political thought constituted the basis of political rivalry within Islam. Today, they continue to provide the basis of legitimacy for the many movements, organizations, and sects that consider themselves to be part of the universe of political Islam. What is important to note, however, is that only the third group had sanctioned assassinations and different forms of political violence to achieve its objectives, while branding their opponents as infidels.

It was this third strand of Islamic political thought that would constitute the ideological basis for the emergence of the Muslim Brotherhood in the wake of the ideological and political vacuum left after the dissolution of the Islamic Caliphate in 1924 after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Four years later the Society of Muslim Brothers was born in Egypt espousing the fundamental tenets of the *Khawarij* paradigm of power and authority not only for Egypt but for the entire Islamic World. Since then, this development has formed the basis of the ongoing clash between the modern state model and the religious *"Khawarijite"* or Kharijite state model in Egypt and across the wider Muslim world.

The ideological, organizational, and doctrinal tenets espoused by the Brotherhood are often overlooked by advocates of the "root causes" approach. Rather than constituting a force for political pluralism or ideological moderation, a close examination of these tenets reveals the Brotherhood as a totalitarian organization that is irreconcilable with the fundamental pillars of a modern democratic polity.

The Muslim Brotherhood as a Totalitarian Organization

The discourse of the Muslim Brotherhood reflects a fundamental and persistent divergence between their general pronouncements and specific policy proposals, as well as between what they say in English for a global (Western) audience, and what they say in Arabic directed at their constituency. Serious scrutiny of their documents and public discourse reflects a project of religious tyrannical orientation. The political project of the Brotherhood in Egypt and elsewhere has four basic aims: creating the "faithful man," establishing the theocratic polity, enhancing the interventionist state, and advocating confrontational foreign and national security policies. To achieve these aims, the founders of the MB in 1928 put forward a plan for "Action," "Organization," and "Ideology."

By action, the Brotherhood draws a distinction between two conditions: weakness and empowerment, both of which are measured by the prevailing balance of power. When the balance of power with other political forces—whether they are in government or in the opposition—is not in their favor, the Muslim Brotherhood exhibits an image of moderation. This is particularly evident in the United States, Europe, and generally in Western countries where the Brotherhood succeeded in mastering the representation of Muslims and speaking on their behalf. These include in the United States virtually all major entities representing Muslims in contemporary American politics: The Islamic Society on North America (ISNA), the Muslim Student Association (MSA), the Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC), the Muslim American Society (MAS), and the Council on American–Islamic Relations (CARE). Under such conditions, the Brotherhood discourse will emphasize democracy (Shoura), human rights, civic society, equality, and condemnation of violence. In their declaration in pre-2005 parliamentary elections in Egypt, the Brotherhood stated that their goal is to establish in Egypt, a "democratic, constitutional, parliamentary, and republican system."

However, with the Brotherhood the devil is always in the details. The Brotherhood never fails to inject conditions and reservation into their liberal statements such as "within the confines of the principles of Islam," or "without prejudice to what is known by necessity about Islamic Sharia," which entails qualifying whatever moderate policy pronouncements are made so as to conform with their own restrictive interpretations of Islamist doctrine. In this regard the job of politics is not to legislate for public interest, but to make the "right" interpretation of the divine and the

sacrosanct. In effect, this approach to governance is not based on legislation by a democratically elected body, but on fatwa.

Operationalizing the Brotherhood's program is the task of the "organization" which constitutes the second tenant of the MB's doctrine. In almost eight decades the Brotherhood has built a massive politico-religious organization that is working locally according to the circumstances of each country. The Brotherhood organization at the same time is global in its reach, encompassing almost eighty-one countries tied together in an internationalist framework in which Egyptians always have had a special place.

The socioeconomic make-up of the organization is mostly urban and middle class. The MB follows the traditions of totalitarian organizations of the communist and fascist brands which are based on secrecy and a rigidly hierarchical pyramid-like structure composed of a base of small cells reporting to provincial chapters and then finally to a powerful and highly centralized political organ at the top. In the case of the Muslim Brotherhood its highest office has been the "Guidance Bureau" led by the "Supreme Guide" and observed by a "Shura" Council to channel opinions to the leadership.

Throughout the history of the Muslim Brotherhood, the organization has been run by iron-clad rules of "Listening and Obedience," a rigorous system of socialization and indoctrination into the ideology of the movement that initially was based on the writings and speeches of the original founder Hassan El-Banna, but since the 1950s has expanded to include the writings of Sayyid Qutb. In addition, the organization has taken the name of the Society of the Muslim Brothers. The hierarchical structure of the Brotherhood is reflected in the collection of taxes from its members, the investment in businesses to generate funds nationally and globally, and spending on the political and social activities of the movement.

All in all, the Muslim Brotherhood has constructed one of the most extensive financial and political organizations in the Arab and Islamic worlds. In Egypt, despite periodic confrontations with the state during the monarchy and the republic eras, it is this organization that has enabled the Brotherhood to weather the many storms it faced, emerging more powerful and capable from its confrontations against the Egyptian monarchy, the Nasserist state, and later against the Hosni Mubarak regime. Strict secrecy surrounding the inner workings of the organization, its politics, finances, and membership are maintained at all times even after the Brotherhood was legalized in 2011 and when they controlled the parliament and the presidency.

Two major organs have been basic to the work of the Brotherhood: a very effective propaganda machine, and a special paramilitary apparatus. Both were under the direct leadership of the Guidance Bureau and the Supreme Guide. The propaganda machine had used books, leaflets, statements, speeches, and sermons at mosques to propagate the message of the movement. The logo and its flag depicts two crossed swords with

the Quran in between and under the swords the word "Prepare," which is the initial word in a Quranic verse that commands Muslims to ready themselves for, "terrifying the enemy of God and your enemy."

Later on, particularly in the past two decades, the Brotherhood has been savvy in its use of modern audiovisual and digital communications. Currently, the Egyptian Brotherhood operates TV stations from Doha in Qatar, Istanbul in Turkey, and London in addition to numerous digital platforms and news agencies.

Reinforcing the organizational hierarchy is the Brotherhood's paramilitary organization which dates back to the establishment of the movement with the formation of the "Special Apparatus" by its founder El-Banna. The Brotherhood plot under the leadership of Qutb in 1965 to sabotage public infrastructure and key political and military facilities revealed the scope and capabilities of this secret organization. During the 2011 uprising, the Brotherhood displayed the same prowess and organizational skill, enabling them to take on the police and enforce discipline among their followers in Tahrir Square.

Complementing the focus on "action" and "organization" as cornerstones of Brotherhood doctrine is the primacy of ideology as the central pillar shaping the identity of the Brotherhood as a totalitarian organization. True to its founder (Hassan Al Banna) and its later mentor (Qutb), the Muslim Brotherhood has been an ideological organization par excellence. According to El-Banna: "It is the nature of Islam to dominate, not to be dominated, to impose its law on all nations and to extend its power to the entire planet." In order to achieve the Brotherhood's goals, the members of the organization have to abide by five major doctrinal principles:

1. *Al Hakimia*, the Khawarjite principle of upholding God's word to guide and control man, society, and the globe is the defining understanding for the movement to move forward.
2. *Allegiance and Obedience* by all members of the movement ensure unquestioned adherence to the direction of the Brotherhood leadership embodied in the Supreme Guide and the Guidance Bureau, while at the same time reinforcing the rigid hierarchy of the organization.
3. *Jihad* is the ultimate mission of the Muslim Brotherhood on Earth to spread the word of Islam by all means including force. Ironically, it is a matter of consensus among all Muslims that Islam has five main pillars: the *Shihada* or the testimony that God is One and Mohammed is His messenger, prayers five times a day, fasting in the month of Ramadan, alms to the poor, and the Hajj or pilgrimage to Mecca if the Muslim has the means. To these the Brotherhood added the tenet of jihad as an additional core pillar of Islam.

4. *The inevitability of confrontation* with Western civilization with its secular nature—irrespective of the particular political ideology prevailing in any given Western country whether liberal or socialist—is the essence of the jihad.
5. *Takfir despite ignorance* was a major addition by Qutb to MB literature as before him the lack of Islamic knowledge was considered an excuse from the Kafir or infidel description.

Taken together the doctrinal tenets of "action," "organization," and "ideology" reveal the true nature of the Muslim Brotherhood as a political movement similar to those totalitarian organizations that emerged whether on the left or the right of the political spectrum. None of these have historically emerged except through the employment of political violence as an instrument to realize ideologically inspired objectives. In the case of the Brotherhood, violence has been a consistent vehicle by which the organization has sought to intimidate opponents, dominate societies, and suppress dissent.

The Brotherhood–Terrorism Nexus

The 2014 Global Terrorism Index (GTI) studied terrorism in 162 countries from 2000 to 2013 during which the frequency of terrorist operations and number of casualties were on the rise. One of the significant findings of the GTI was that terrorism and extremism are concentrated in a number of countries. In 2013, 80 percent of the victims were in five countries: Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Nigeria, and Syria. All had Muslim Brotherhood organizations in addition to a cocktail of other militant organizations from the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan, to Al-Qaeda, ISIL in Iraq and Syria, Boko Haram in Nigeria, and Al-Shabab in Somalia. The highest region in the world for militancy and extremism is the MENA region where 53 percent of all suicide operations occurred.

The GTI 2014 has refuted the prevailing theory in the West of the root causes theory of terrorism: that there are underlying social grievances which result in terrorist activity. Rather than the presence of pervasive root causes to terrorism, the GTI study found that "there is no systematic link to poverty measures, nor to several broader economic development factors such as Human Development Index or its subcomponents such as the mean years of schooling, or life expectancy. Similarly economic indicators such as year to year GDP growth do not correlate."

So if the root causes theory is not correct, what did the GTI study determine were the reasons behind the development of terror networks? GTI suggested that the reasons for terrorism can be found in the convergence of socioeconomic factors such as political instability, intergroup cohesion, and legitimacy of the state. For example, despite the fact that secessionist movements featured prominently in terrorist networks in 2000, the main source of terrorism—religion—soon emerged as a dominant

factor, particularly in the MENA region where it was the cause of 80 percent of terrorist attacks. In addition to the GTI study, both Gallop and Zoghbi polling in the Middle East reflect many of the same conclusions. The salient role of religiously inspired terrorism has also been confirmed by several credible analysts of terrorism. For example, Daniel Byman observed that "afflictions that began as the products of the underlying problems of the region, have become causes of security problems in their own right, and merely solving the root causes is no longer enough."

It is thus religion or the Khawarij model and paradigm of governance, rather than root causes, which constitutes the major correlating factor behind terrorism. The Khawarij tradition espouse a radical model of the state that the Brotherhood sought to implement in Egypt after the 2011 uprising in the form of the 2012 constitution in order to create not an authoritarian state but a totalitarian–religious one.

The linkages between the Muslim Brotherhood, religious extremism, and terrorism in Egypt are an important part of the debate about the Brotherhood movement. These linkages are more complex than it would seem at first glance as the Brotherhood acts as an incubator, a mobilizer, and at times as a perpetrator of different forms of violence.

As an incubator the Brotherhood fostered the emergence of more extremist groups, movements, and political parties. None of them, however, deviated from the core tenets that dominated Muslim Brotherhood doctrine since its founding by El-Banna, and later influenced by Qutb.

As perpetrators of terrorism, the early Muslim Brotherhood perpetrated assassinations in the 1940s against Egyptian governmental, judicial, and military leaders. In the late 1940s, members of the Muslim Brotherhood firebombed Jewish houses and shops. Later, in 1954, the Muslim Brotherhood attempted to assassinate President Gamal Abdel Nasser. All of this culminated with the execution of Qutb in 1966 for leading a wide-ranging campaign of violence targeting railways, roads, and public facilities. Today, Qutb has a larger influence over terrorist groups that have spun out of the Muslim Brotherhood, and which have been more forceful in agitating for violence as a vehicle to attain political power.

During the 1970s, there was the Islamic Liberation Party, which tried to overthrow the ruling elite in Egypt. Its failure did not prevent Egyptian terrorist group *Al-Takfir Wa-l-Higra* from attempting to blackmail the state by assassinating former Minister of Endowment Mohamed Al-Dhahabi. Universities, particularly in Upper Egypt, produced *Al-Gamaa Al-Islamia*, and the more violent *Jihad* group, both of which collaborated in the assassination of President Sadat. None of these groups deviated from the original principle of *Al-Hakimia* of the Khawarij doctrine, and the core ideological tenets of the Muslim Brotherhood. A number of the leading members of these organizations have passed through the Brotherhood at one time or another. Many of the

global terrorist "stars" were once members of the Brotherhood. Both Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the presumptive mastermind of the 9/11 attack, and Mohamed Atta, one of its operational leaders, had been active members of the Brotherhood in Yemen and Egypt, respectively. Ayman Al-Zawahiri—the current leader of Al-Qaeda—started his terrorist career following his initial indoctrination as a member of the Brotherhood.

As a mobilizer, the Brotherhood has helped financially and logistically, the Afghani Jihad and both Al-Qaeda and ISIS, whether in Syria or in Egypt. The Brotherhood leadership never really denounced terrorism without adding qualifying "buts" and "ifs" under the banners of resisting foreign powers or fighting local authoritarianism. One has to look hard to find the word "terrorism" in any of the Brotherhood basic documents. The Brotherhood's financial and propaganda machines are working at full force to delegitimize the current Egyptian political system. Incitement for the use of violence as a mode of protest is a daily practice against Egypt, propagated through the TV channels Asharq, Mekameleen, Al Arabi Al Gadid, and others.

A Continuing Legacy of Violence

For four decades, the Egyptian government and the Brotherhood went through a gradual process of accommodation. During the 1970s President Sadat released the leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood from prison. This was followed by President Mubarak who paved the way for the Brotherhood's participation in the political process, culminating in the 2005 parliamentary elections during which representatives of the organization managed to win eighty-eight seats, nearly a fifth of parliament.

However, the expectation that this process of political integration would somehow moderate the ideological tenets of the Brotherhood and prompt the organization to disavow political violence proved unfounded. During the Brotherhood's participation in the events of the 2011 Egyptian uprising, the Muslim Brotherhood activated their "self-defense units," which clashed with the police resulting in an estimated 1,075 civilian deaths in the eighteen days of the uprising. The MB initiated waves of attacks targeting prisons, including the main prison of Wadi Al-Natroun, releasing more than 11,000 prisoners including Brotherhood members (soon-to-be President Mohamed Morsi was among the prisoners released from Wadi Al-Natroun) as well as terrorist prisoners from the organizations Al-Qaeda, Jihad, Hamas, and Hezbollah.

During and after the uprising, members of the Brotherhood also attacked and burned thirty police stations in Cairo plus a number of public buildings, malls, and courthouses. The Al-Galaa Courts Complex was burned down and from there the Al Ahram Building was shot at and one of Al-Ahram's employees murdered.

The Brotherhood's violence reached its nadir as the political wing of the MB came to the pinnacle of executive and legislative power from 2012 to 2013. The Brotherhood

dispelled peaceful demonstrations by force, intimidated state institutions including the Supreme Constitutional Court, and threatened political opponents including prominent media personalities, Coptic Christians, and public figures who criticized the Brotherhood.

The extent of the Brotherhood's violent nature as a terrorist organization was on full display during the events of the June 30 uprising. First and contrary to the prevailing views, the MB started to mobilize masses and demonstrations to occupy main squares in Cairo and provinces across Egypt starting on June 21. Sit-ins started to take shape particularly in Rabaa Al-Adawya Square near the Ministry of Defense, and Nahda Square near Cairo University. Clashes with the police and the youth demonstrators of Tamarod or Rebellion movement resulted in civilian casualties, including an American student who died on June 28. The protests in Rabaa and Nahda were mobile, gathering demonstrators from across Cairo and causing a massive disruption of traffic. Also the Brotherhood reportedly had snipers on surrounding buildings of their protests. After fifty-five days of violent sit-ins in Rabaa and Nahda, security forces dispersed them on August 14 after frequent warnings. There were 525 casualties including forty-three police.

In the immediate aftermath of Rabaa the Brotherhood went on a rampage attacking and burning police stations, killing personnel, taking weapons, and releasing prisoners. In the town of Kerdassa they killed fourteen police officers and their bodies were mutilated. Forty-four churches were burned down and the newly built Museum of Antiquities was robbed and torched. Between June 2013 to the end of February 2016, the Muslim Brotherhood and ISIS killed nine hundred police officers and committed 1,494 acts of violence across Egypt. Brotherhood members have worked to sabotage Egyptian electricity grids and disrupt traffic.

When these acts of violence started to cool down by the end of 2016, the MB produced a number of small terrorist groups named the Revolutionary Punishment, the Arms of Egypt movement, and the Revolutionary Brigade. Some members of the MB have joined ISIS and in some terrorist operations Muslim Brotherhood members have provided logistical and financial support.

As of 2018, terrorism of the Brotherhood and its affiliated fundamentalist organizations continued in Egypt in different forms. While organizations such as ISIS or Al-Qaeda made their terrorist operations in Sinai and the Western Desert, the Muslim Brotherhood concentrated its operations on the Egyptian mainland.

The Brotherhood Today: Unreformed and Unrepentant

The historical evolution, ideological doctrine, and organizational structure of the Brotherhood all reveal a movement that is as politically totalitarian as it is religiously extreme. The notion that the Brotherhood can ever be a force for pluralism and

political openness if only the "root causes" that have driven them to extremism are addressed belies their violent history, their frequent resort to terrorism, and the inescapable reality that it has spawned countless terrorist groups that today continue to afflict Egypt and the region.

Deriving their doctrinal tenets from the extremist political model espoused by the Kharijites, the Brotherhood is structurally no different from similar totalitarian organizations that have appeared under the banners of fascism, Nazism, and communism. Brotherhood members strive to create a theocratic regime not so different from the Iranian political system. In their actions, organization, and ideology, the MB acts as an incubator of terrorists, a mobilizer of human and material resources to fund and to defend terrorism, whether directly or indirectly.

The global reach of the organization has given the Muslim Brotherhood the ability to survive by adapting itself to existent political realities. In Egypt the Brotherhood opportunistically grew their organization as a so-called "economically liberal" social group, all the while never condemning violence or jihad in its rhetoric or its actions.

Despite the political opening provided by the 2011 uprisings in Egypt and region, which the Brotherhood cynically exploited to reach the heights of political power, it remained an unreformed, unreconstructed, and unrepentant movement, incapable of engaging in the type of reform and introspection necessary to adjust to the demands of democratic politics.