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The Muslim Brotherhood in the West

Characteristics, Aims and Policy Considerations

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The Muslim Brotherhood in the West:
Characteristics, aims and policy considerations[2]

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Terrorism, HUMINT, Analysis, and Counterintelligence

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Chairwoman Myrick, Members of the Subcommittee,

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to express my thoughts on such an important topic. The latest events in the Middle East have brought the Muslim Brotherhood to the fore of the political debate. As we observe the crucial developments of the next few months in Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood's birthplace, it is important to also take a broader perspective and analyze the global reach of the world's oldest and most influential Islamist movement.

I would therefore like to divide my testimony in three parts. The first will outline the characteristics of what is commonly referred to as "global Muslim Brotherhood," focusing particularly on the West. It will explain that Brotherhood offshoots in Europe and North America are not inserted in a formal and hierarchical structure led from Cairo or any other Middle Eastern city. While retaining historical, financial, personal, organizational, and, most important, ideological ties to the Muslim Brotherhood, these offshoots operate in operational independence.

The second part will identify the main goals of Western Brotherhood organizations in preserving a strong Islamic identity among Western Muslims and becoming the *de facto* representatives of local Muslim communities in dealing with Western establishments. It will also outline the difficulties experienced by analysts and governments in assessing and engaging Western Brotherhood organizations, with opinions split between "pessimists" and "optimists."

The third and final part provides policy recommendations. Instead of embracing or marginalizing Western Brotherhood organizations, I argue that a third, more nuanced way forward is represented by a policy of engagement without empowerment. Authorities should talk to Western Brotherhood organizations but only as long as (1) they make sure to also engage other Muslim organizations, because the Brothers' visibility should not be mistaken for universal representation, (2) they are fully aware of the Brothers' history, modus operandi, and aims, and (3) their engagement does not transcend into an undue and counterproductive support of the Brothers.

A Global Movement

Founded in Egypt in 1928, the Muslim Brotherhood saw its ideas quickly spread throughout the Arab world and beyond. Today, groups in more than 80 countries trace their origins to the Brotherhood and have adopted various forms and tactics according to the environment in which they operate. Where it is tolerated, as in Jordan, it functions as a political party; where it is persecuted, as in Syria, it survives underground; and in the Palestinian territories, it took a peculiar turn and became Hamas.

Therefore, the term "Muslim Brotherhood" can simultaneously encapsulate various realities. It is still an organization with a formal structure in Egypt and in various Middle Eastern countries, where some groups view themselves as its local branches. But the Brotherhood is also a global movement in which like-minded individuals interact through an informal yet very sophisticated international network of personal, financial, organizational, and, most important, ideological ties. Mohammed Akef, the former *murshid* of the Egyptian branch of the Brotherhood, describes it as "a global movement whose members cooperate with each other throughout the world, based on the same religious worldview—the spread of Islam, until it rules the world." Other Brotherhood leaders describe the movement as a "common way of thinking" and "an international school of thought."

In reality, an international coordinating body does exist, but its role, albeit not completely clear to outsiders, appears to be marginal. Entities belonging to the "global Muslim Brotherhood" work according to a common vision but in operational independence. There are consultations and constant communication, but each entity is free to choose its tactics and pursue its goals as it deems appropriate. What binds all these entities together is a deep belief in Islam as a comprehensive way of life that, in the long term, they hope to turn into a political system using different methods in different times and places. Taking full advantage of the benefits of

globalization and modern technology, they constitute a perfect example of modern transnational activism: informal, heterogeneous, and in constant evolution.

This global movement has a relatively small yet very active presence in most Western countries, including the United States. The formation of these networks follows a similar pattern throughout the West. In the 1960s and 1970s, small groups of Brotherhood militants fleeing persecution in Egypt and other Middle Eastern countries received asylum in Europe and North America. They soon started interacting with a small number of Middle Eastern students—members of the educated, urban middle classes of their countries who had come the West to further their studies in local universities.

The combination of experienced militants and enthusiastic students bore immediate fruits, as Brotherhood activists formed some of the West's first Muslim organizations (in the United States, the Muslim Students Association, founded on the campus of University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in 1963). The West's freedoms allowed the Brothers to openly conduct the activities for which they had been persecuted in their home countries; with little funds but plenty of enthusiasm, they published magazines, organized lectures, and carried out all sorts of activities through which they could spread their ideology. Their activism soon attracted other Muslim students and small numbers of Muslim immigrants who had not had contact with the Brotherhood in their home countries. It is important to point out that the arrival of the first Brothers to Europe and North America was hardly the first phase of a concerted plot of the Muslim Brotherhood to Islamize the West, as it is sometimes portrayed. They initially represented a small, disperse contingent of militants whose move reflected not a centralized plan but rather personal decisions that by chance brought some Brotherhood figures to spend some years or the rest of their lives in the West.

Yet the small organizations they spontaneously formed soon developed well beyond their most optimistic expectations. Today, thanks to a combination of ideological flexibility, unrelenting activism, large funding, and the poor organization of competing Islamic movements, the networks originally established by the Brotherhood pioneers have gained significant influence. Even if their membership has remained fairly small, the Western Brothers have shown an enormous ability to monopolize the Islamic discourse, putting their ideological stamp on any Islam-related issue, be it strictly religious or more properly political. Several concepts and positions introduced by the Brothers have been absorbed, often almost unconsciously, by large segments of Western Muslim populations, irrespective of their religious and political views.

Moreover, in the United States and in most European countries, the Western Brothers have positioned themselves at the forefront of the competition to be the main interlocutors of local elites, be they in government, media, or academia. It is not uncommon to find exceptions to this situation and things have changed in various countries over the last few years, but overall, it is apparent that no other Islamic movement has the visibility, political influence, and access to Western elites that the Western Brothers have obtained over the last 20 years. In light of these facts, it is fair to portray the competition for the representation of Western Muslims as the relative victory of a well-organized minority over other less organized minorities for the voice of a silent majority.

Evolution and Aims

Can we then properly speak of the Muslim Brotherhood in the West? If with this expression we seek to identify offshoots of any Middle Eastern branch of the Brotherhood linked by a dependent relationship, then the term is arguably incorrect. Yet the lack of formal ties should not be overstated. Taking a non-formalistic approach, it is fair to say that in the United States and in virtually all Western countries, there are organizations and networks that have historical, financial, personal, organizational, and ideological ties to the Muslim Brotherhood.

Over the last 30 years, these organizations have significantly readjusted their tactics and goals. It soon became obvious to a movement as pragmatic as the Brotherhood that it made little sense to blindly apply in modern Europe and North America what Muslim Brotherhood founder Hassan al Banna had proscribed in Egypt in the 1930s. While there is no question that Western offshoots of the Brotherhood support the formation of Islamic states in Muslim-majority countries, their goals in the West are different. The Brotherhood, in the West as elsewhere, is hardly a stagnant movement; flexibility and continuous evolution are two of its core characteristics and strengths. It is fair to refer to Western Brotherhood organizations as such, but it would be a mistake to consider them as identical in goals and views to Brotherhood offshoots in, let's say, Yemen or Kuwait.

Some critics argue that the main goal of Western Brotherhood organizations is to establish sharia law in the West. Unquestionably that prospect looms in the imagination of the Brothers. Tellingly, Yussuf al Qaradawi, the spiritual leader of the global Muslim Brotherhood, stated in a speech delivered in Toledo, Ohio, in 1995: "We will conquer Europe, we will conquer America, not through the sword but through dawa [preaching]." And it is undeniable that Western Brotherhood organizations have led efforts to introduce limited aspects of sharia law in Western societies, both

by establishing sharia advisory bodies (like the Fiqh Council of North America) and by lobbying Western governments to accept some sharia principles in Western legal systems.

But the introduction of sharia in the West is hardly the Western Brothers' goal at this stage. Pragmatic and keenly aware of what they can and cannot do, their priorities lay elsewhere. Foremost among their goals is preserving an Islamic identity among Western Muslims. As any religiously conservative movement, Islamists worldwide are concerned with maintaining the morality and piousness of their communities. Such a defensive posture becomes even more important when referred to Muslim minorities, because they incur the risk of being culturally absorbed by the host society. "It is the duty of the Islamic Movement," wrote al Qaradawi, "not to leave these expatriates to be swept by the whirlpool of the materialistic trend that prevails in the West."

Yet unlike Salafists and other Islamic trends that seek to strengthen the Islamic identity of Western Muslims, the Brothers do not advocate isolation from mainstream society. To the contrary, they urge Muslims to actively participate in it, but only in so far as such engagement is necessary to change it in an Islamic fashion. According to al Qaradawi, Muslims in the West should adopt "a conservatism without isolation, and an openness without melting." Finding the balance between cultural impermeability and active sociopolitical interaction is not easy, but the Brothers see themselves as those capable of defining how Muslims can be loyal to their faith and yet active citizens of Western secular democracies.

The Brothers see this guiding role as an unprecedented opportunity for the movement, which, in the words of al Qaradawi, can "play the role of the missing leadership of the Muslim nation with all its trends and groups." While the Brotherhood can exercise only limited influence in Muslim-majority countries, because it is kept in check by regimes that oppose it, al Qaradawi realizes that no such obstacle prevents it from operating in the free and democratic West. Moreover, the masses of Muslim expatriates, disoriented by the impact of life in non-Muslim societies and often lacking the most basic knowledge about Islam, represent an ideally receptive audience for the movement's message. Finally, no competing Islamic movement has the financial means and organization to compete with the Western Brothers. The combination of these factors leads al Qaradawi to conclude that the West is a sort of Islamic *tabula rasa*, a virgin territory where the socioreligious structures and limits of the Muslim world do not exist and where the Brothers can implement their *dawa* freely, overcoming their competition with their superior mobilization skills and funds.

A second goal common to all Western Brotherhood organizations is to be designated as *de facto* representatives of the Muslim community of the country they are in. Despite their unrelenting activism and ample resources, in fact, the Brothers have not been able to create a mass movement and attract the allegiance of large numbers of Western Muslims. While concepts, issues, and frames introduced by the Brothers have reached many Western Muslims, most of them either actively resist the Brothers' influence or simply ignore it. The Brothers understand that a preferential relationship with Western elites could provide them with the financial and political capital that would allow them to significantly expand their reach and influence inside the community. They would, ideally, become those whom governments task with appointing imams in such public institutions as the military, the police, or prisons and with receiving subsidies to administer various social services. This position would also allow them to be the *de facto* official Muslim voice in public debates and in the media, overshadowing competing forces. The powers and legitimacy bestowed on them by Western governments would allow them to exert significantly increased influence over the Muslim community. Making a clever political calculation, the Western Brothers are attempting to turn their leadership bid into a self-fulfilling prophecy, seeking to be recognized by Western establishments as representatives of the Muslim community so as to eventually attain that same recognition from within the Muslim community itself.

Assessments of the Western Brothers closely resemble those of the global Islamist movement, with analysts split between optimists and pessimists. More specifically, optimists argue that the Western Brothers are simply a socially conservative force that, unlike other movements with which they are often mistakenly grouped, encourages the integration of Western Muslim communities and offers a model in which Muslims can live their faith fully and maintain a strong Islamic identity while becoming actively engaged citizens. Moreover, argue the optimists, governments should harness the Western Brothers' grassroots activities and cooperate with them on common issues, including terrorism and radicalization.

Pessimists see a much more sinister nature in the Western Brotherhood. Pessimists argue that thanks to the Western Brothers' resources and the naiveté of most Westerners, the Western Brothers are engaged in a slow but steady social engineering program, aimed at Islamizing Western Muslim populations and ultimately at competing with Western governments for their allegiance. The pessimists accuse the Brothers of being a modern-day Trojan horse, engaged in a sort of stealth subversion aimed at weakening Western society from within, patiently laying the foundations for its replacement with an Islamic order. The fact that the Western Brothers do not use violence but participate with enthusiasm in the democratic process is seen simply as a cold calculation on their part. According to pessimists, officials of Brotherhood-linked organizations have understood that infiltrating the system, rather than attacking it head on, is the best way to

obtain what they want; after all, in the West, at least for now, the harsh confrontations mounted by al Qaeda lead nowhere.

In the United States, argue pessimists, someone like Abdurahman Alamoudi exemplifies this approach. In 1990, upon finishing his graduate studies in Boston, Alamoudi settled in Washington D.C., where he co-founded the American Muslim Council (AMC), a small but influential Muslim Brotherhood-linked lobbying group. Alamoudi soon became a staple of Washington life, establishing good relationships with both Republican and Democratic administrations and even managing to lobby Congress to host, for the first time in history, the opening invocation from an Islamic leader. The Department of Defense put Alamoudi in the powerful position of training and vetting the imams who attend to the religious needs of American Muslims serving in the military. His organization was praised by the FBI as "the most mainstream Muslim group in the United States," and the State Department appointed him as a goodwill ambassador.

Washington's establishment considered Alamoudi a successful, representative and moderate Muslim leader who could be a spokesman for the American Muslim community. In 2003, however, this veneer collapsed. An investigation triggered by a routine customs control at London's Heathrow Airport showed that Alamoudi was involved in a murky al Qaeda-linked plot to assassinate Saudi Crown Prince Abdallah. Alamoudi later pled guilty to all charges and is now serving a 23-year sentence. Wiretaps and recordings that emerged after his arrest showed that Alamoudi had consistently praised al Qaeda, Hamas, and Hezbollah in private and in various public gatherings. Although the height of Alamoudi's fall make his case unique, critics argue that Alamoudi's ability in advancing his agenda while displaying a moderate façade when interacting with Western elites is hardly an exception but rather the Brothers' standard modus operandi.

It is noteworthy that this negative assessment is shared by most intelligence agencies throughout continental Europe. The AIVD, the Netherlands' domestic intelligence agency, for example, has stated in a published report:

…Not all Muslim Brothers or their sympathizers are recognisable as such. They do not always reveal their religious loyalties and ultra-orthodox agenda to outsiders. Apparently co-operative and moderate in their attitude to Western society, they certainly have no violent intent. But they are trying to pave the way for ultra-orthodox Islam to play a greater role in the Western world by exercising religious influence over Muslim immigrant communities and by forging good relations with relevant opinion leaders: politicians, civil servants, mainstream social organizations, non-Islamic clerics, academics, journalists and so on. This policy of engagement has been more noticeable in recent years, and might possibly herald a certain liberalisation of the movement's

ideas. It presents itself as a widely supported advocate and legitimate representative of the Islamic community. But the ultimate aim—although never stated openly—is to create, then implant and expand, an ultra-orthodox Muslim bloc inside Western Europe.

Yet in the Netherlands as in any other Western country, governments, lawmakers, and bureaucrats of all levels are not bound by the assessment of their countries' intelligence agencies and often espouse different ideas. Experts inside and outside government often influence policymakers' opinions, leading to a complex situation in which institutions swing between actions that reflect first optimistic and then pessimistic views of the movement. In substance, no Western country has adopted a cohesive assessment followed by all branches of its government. There is no centrally issued white paper or set of internal guidelines sent to all government officials detailing how Western Brotherhood organizations should be identified, assessed, and eventually engaged. This leads to inconsistencies in policies, not only from department to department but even from office to office of the same body.

Here in the United States this dynamic is exemplified by the FBI's relationship with the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), arguably the most visible and controversial among the U.S.-based organizations that trace their origins to the Muslim Brotherhood. Opinions about CAIR appear to be divided within the Bureau. On the one hand, FBI officials have repeatedly and publicly thanked CAIR for its role in "keep[ing] the nation safe" and praised its "commitment to maintaining a dialogue leading to the frank and honest exchange of ideas." And in 2006 the Washington field office sent CAIR a commendation letter praising its "dedication in representing the heart of the Muslim American community." Yet on the other hand, a top official like Steven Pomerantz, former Assistant Director and former Chief of the Counterterrorism Section of the FBI, has publicly stated that "[i]t is clear from a review of CAIR's statements and activities that one of its goals is to further the agenda of radical Islamic terrorist groups by providing political support. By masquerading as a mainstream public affairs organization, CAIR has taken the lead in trying to mislead the public about the terrorist underpinnings of militant Islamic movements." And in the wake of the 2008 Holy Land Foundation terrorism financing trial, the FBI formally cut its ties to CAIR.

This apparent contradiction, which is hardly limited to the FBI, is the result of a combination of factors, ranging from differences in views among individual FBI officials to the FBI's general tendency to shy away from ideological debates. But it is apparent that there is a general understanding within the FBI that while CAIR and some of its affiliates might not be the ideal partners the Bureau is seeking when reaching out to the Muslim community, they are a necessary one. Since 9/11, the FBI has faced severe challenges in gaining the trust of the Muslim

community. The FBI is perceived among some segments of the American Muslim community as an almost almighty and all-knowing entity whose sole goal is to "get Muslims." This reputation, generated more from a combination of Hollywood movies and urban legends than from direct knowledge of the Bureau's capabilities and aims, creates a severe challenge to the FBI's outreach effort. The only possible solution for the FBI was to find leaders in the Muslim community who could help.

The task proved difficult. Affluent, well-integrated, and scattered throughout a huge country, the vast majority of American Muslims do not belong to any religious organization or are simply engaged in local mosque associations. With few exceptions, the only groups that have a national profile, capable of operating offices in Washington and branches throughout the country, trace their origins, at least ideologically, to the Muslim Brotherhood. Despite a heated internal debate within the Bureau over the issue, the FBI's upper management seems to have decided that reaching out to these organizations is a valuable part of its counterterrorism strategy. "We now have partners in the Arab-American and Muslim communities," FBI director Robert Mueller has stated in congressional testimony. "Some have become publicly declared allies in our efforts to condemn terrorism. They have become our bridge to many who viewed the FBI with either contempt, or worse, fear."

The relationship could not be more complex. The hearings recently organized by Congressman Peter King highlighted the story of Abdirizak Bihi, the Somali community leader who was ostracized by CAIR and related organizations for reaching out to the FBI to stop al Shabaab's recruitment in Minneapolis. But at the same time, CAIR has cooperated with the FBI in some terrorism cases, like that of the five Northern Virginia residents who traveled to Pakistan to obtain terrorist training in late 2009. Counterterrorism is one of the many fields where policymakers face a dilemma, where they understand that no clear-cut and easy solution exists. In the words of Juan Zarate, "the complication is that they [the Muslim Brothers] are a political movement, an economic cadre and in some cases terrorist supporters. They have one foot in our world and one foot in a world hostile to us. How to decipher what is good, bad or suspect is a severe complication."

Engage but Don't Empower

The difficulties experienced by most Western governments in assessing and engaging Western Brotherhood organizations are paradigmatic of the challenges posed by such a complex movement. Conceptualizing a movement that mixes politics and religion, particularly a religion about which most policymakers know little, has understandably proven extremely difficult. In

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some cases, the Brothers' actions seem to reflect the moderation and pro-integration stance that Western governments are desperately looking for in their Muslim interlocutors. In others, they seem to harbor an agenda and embrace values diametrically opposed to those of a Western liberal democracy. Policymakers find themselves in a bind.

Many among the pessimists call for policies that would exclude the Western Brothers from any engagement. Considering them deceitful actors seeking to destroy the very same freedoms that have allowed them to flourish, critics argue that their organizations should be marginalized or even outlawed as subversive, as the political wings of a global Islamist insurgency. While this position highlights some troubling aspects of the Western Brothers' nature and agenda that unquestionably need to be addressed, such a position is unrealistic and, arguably, dangerous.

Although their claims of representativeness are often overblown, Western Brotherhood organizations do represent one segment of the Muslim community. If the aim of a government is to hear all voices, then it makes little sense to exclude an important one. Talking only to those Muslim leaders whose positions square with the government's and pretending that more confrontational voices do not exist is hardly a constructive policy. When Western Brotherhood organizations act outside the law, as when they provide financial support to groups designated as terrorist, they should be prosecuted. But since most of their activities are clearly within the law, they are a reality that cannot be ignored and should be engaged. Moreover, more pragmatically, marginalizing the Western Brotherhood could trigger a radicalization of the movement.

A diametrically opposite approach, advocated by some optimists, sees the Western Brothers as reliable partners that authorities should engage in order to favor integration and stem radicalization among Western Muslims. This approach is also problematic. Ample evidence shows that the aims of the Western Brothers do not necessarily correspond to those aims that are publicly stated in dialogues with Western establishments. Taking official actions that could unnecessarily empower a handful of self-appointed leaders whose aims are, at best, unclear, seems naïve. There is the risk that, thanks to the support of the government, a vocal minority would be able to further marginalize competing forces and exercise undue influence over a community that mostly does not embrace the Brothers' conservative and politicized version of Islam.

There is a third, more nuanced approach, which entails cautious engagement of Western Brotherhood organizations. Most governments are now no longer supporting a monopolistic approach. Increasingly aware of the extreme diversity of Western Muslim communities, such governments try to speak to a wider range of voices, proactively seeking to connect with

traditionally underrepresented groups. Looking beyond those self-appointed gatekeepers to the community who have often monopolized access to institutions, policymakers are progressively trying to broaden the spectrum of government interlocutors. Western Brotherhood organizations do represent a section of the community, but their activism and visibility should not be mistaken for universal representativeness.

Moreover, there is a growing awareness of the need for a more refined approach. There are indeed significant advantages in not isolating Western Brotherhood organizations. And even though nobody can exactly predict long-term developments, one could argue that engagement can lead to a moderation of the movement. Isolation, in contrast, could have negative repercussions, further radicalizing the organizations and allowing them to portray themselves as "martyrs" in the eyes of Muslim community. But engagement needs to be based on a firm understanding of the history, characteristics, connections, *modus operandi*, and, most important, aims of the Brothers. Only an informed engagement can lead to a realistic and constructive rapport.

Finally, many policymakers increasingly understand the difference between engagement and empowerment. Establishing a permanent dialogue and even occasional and limited forms of partnership with Western Brotherhood organizations can produce several positive outcomes, particularly in the security field. But entrusting them with undue powers appears to be an option that most Western governments are no longer willing to choose. Striking the right balance between engagement and empowerment is not easy, but doing so is necessary to avoid granting legitimacy and influence to organizations with limited representativeness, whose agenda is not necessarily compatible with those of Western governments.

Crucially important in policy development is the uncertain evolutionary path Western Brotherhood organizations will follow. The organizations established some 40 years ago by the pioneers are undergoing a significant change, as leadership is slowly being passed to a new generation of Western-born activists who will inevitably add their perspectives. Today, it is not unreasonable to speak of some of these organizations as "post-Brotherhood" or "post-Islamist," even though the real meaning of these expressions is still to be defined. Will the Western Brothers evolve into a movement that, while pushing for conservative values and policy positions that might be at odds with the mainstream, fully accepts democracy, human rights, religious equality, and non-violence? Or are the moderate statements of the new generation just a carefully devised smokescreen for the movement's real and more nefarious aims, which still are, as the infamous Akram memorandum introduced as evidence during the Holy Land Foundation trial stated, "a kind of grand Jihad in eliminating and destroying the Western civilization from within and 'sabotaging'

its miserable house"? Only time will tell, and it is not unlikely that different wings of the movement will go in separate and even opposing directions. But for the time being, given this uncertainty, a policy of cautious and informed engagement appears to be the most appropriate. Crafting a coherent policy is not easy, but a non-ideological and pragmatic approach is needed to confront a largely unknown and very ambiguous but important reality.