The Brotherhood and the Shiite Question

By Israel Elad Altman

The Muslim Brotherhood (MB) is a transnational movement that shares a common Ikhwani doctrine of Islamic reform and revival that was originally formulated by the movement’s founder, Shaykh Hasan al-Banna. Despite this common doctrine, however, the Brotherhood’s assorted local organizations and affiliated offshoots have interacted with the specific socio-political conditions of their respective arenas. As a consequence of this, the Brotherhood’s branches have pursued a range of strategies for acquiring power and establishing an Islamic state that has, over time and from place to place, helped create a considerable diversity of political agendas and perspectives within the movement as a whole.

One area in which this intra-Ikwhani diversity is clearly visible today is in the different Brotherhood perspectives of and positions toward what might be broadly called the “Shiite question.” That question has been at the forefront of Sunni Arab religious and political ideology and debate, and especially in recent years due to the growing power and prestige of the Islamic Republic of Iran throughout the region. This, in turn, has led to Shiism’s increasing influence throughout the Middle East in general, and it has also intensified the ongoing clash between some streams of Sunnism and Shiism. The Sunni world has been deeply divided over how to react to these new regional dynamics caused by Iran’s and Shiism’s political and religious resurgence. Likewise, the Brotherhood movement is internally divided over the Shiite question, with some of them supporting and championing Shiism’s new religious and political influence, and other elements of the movement wary of and even hostile to Shiite power.

The Shiite question hasn’t always been an issue for the Brotherhood. At its core,
the Brotherhood’s basic ideological doctrine is pan-Islamic and religiously inclusive. Since the movement’s creation in 1928, Brotherhood leaders have emphasized the political importance of Islamic unity and have sought to downplay the religious differences among various Islamic legal schools, including between Sunnism and Shi’ism. Hassan al-Banna considered all of Islam’s many sects—except for the Bahais and Qadianis—as belonging to the worldwide Muslim Nation (umma). In this spirit, Banna additionally took part in 1948 in the establishment of the “Association for Rapprochement between the Islamic Legal Schools” (Jamiyyat al-Taqrib bayna al-Madhahib al-Islamiyyah). This organization was designed to bridge the religious divides between Sunnis and Shiites, and due to this organization’s leadership and influence, Shaykh al-Azhar Mahmud Shaltut declared Twelver Shia worship to be valid and recognized it as a legal tradition to be taught in al-Azhar. As such, Banna and the organization he created originally adhered to an ideological outlook for which the “Shiite question” did not exist.

Given this ecumenical background, the Brotherhood was initially enthusiastic about the Islamic revolution that took place in Iran in 1979. The revolution was inspiring to the Brotherhood as a model of a popular Islamic movement that had arisen to topple a pro-Western secular regime and had successfully set up an Islamic state. Moreover, the Brotherhood came to see Iran’s Islamic regime as an admirable alternative to secular Arab regimes: Unlike the latter, revolutionary Iran enjoyed both Islamic and popular political legitimacy; also unlike the Arab regimes, Iran was able to defend herself without having to rely on foreign support.

The Brotherhood also shares deep affinity with the Khomeinist political ideology that defined the Iranian revolution and that has been championed by Iran ever since. In traditional Islamic political thought, it is the community which cradles the sharia. Therefore, through its consensus (ijma) the community is the basis of legitimacy and the source of authority, and can thus empower one of its members, through shura (consultation) and bayah (pledge of allegiance), to become the ruler. By contrast, both the Brotherhood’s concept of God’s sovereignty (hakimiyyah) and the Khomeinist doctrine of the “Rule of the Jurist” (velayat-e-faqih) are rooted in the view that it is the sharia, not the community, which is the true source of legitimacy and authority. For example, in Brotherhood ideology, the concept of hakimiyyah signifies Allah’s rule through the implementation of the sharia, and what legitimizes the ruler is his implementation of the sharia, not the will of the people expressed when they elect a ruler. Similarly, the legitimacy of the ruling jurist in Khomeinist doctrine stems from his implementing the sharia on behalf of the Hidden Imam.1

Because of this ideological kinship, the connections between the Brotherhood and Shiite Islamists have been well-established. Indeed, the two revivalist streams were already exchanging ideas in the early 1950s (if not earlier), through the contacts
established between the Egyptian Brotherhood and Navab Safavi, the leader of the Fadaian-e Islam organization that carried out a series of assassinations in Iran in the early 1950s in an effort to “purify Islam.” Safavi once was quoted as saying, “Whoever wants to be a real Jafari [Shiite] should join the Muslim Brotherhood.”

In the 1970s Brotherhood representatives were in close contact with exiled Iranian activists in Europe and the US who were agitating for the overthrow of the Shah’s regime. Moreover, senior Brotherhood figures were the second foreign group to arrive in Tehran right after Khomeini’s triumphal comeback (preceded only by PLO leader Yasser Arafat). After the revolution, the Brotherhood helped the Iranian state bypass the American sanctions that had been imposed on it following the takeover of the US embassy by providing badly needed essential products.

The Brotherhood’s initial enthusiasm and support for the Iranian revolution was soon dampened, however, when the revolution did not turn out to be what its Sunni Islamist admirers had expected it to be. By the mid 1980s, Brotherhood relations with Iran had soured significantly as the nature of revolution was increasingly perceived not in universal and pan-Islamic terms, but as a Persian nationalist and distinctly Shiite revolution. These perceptions became widespread in Sunni Arab societies, especially as Iran attempted to export its revolution to Gulf Arab states, and also as Iran formed an alliance with the Syrian regime, which was engaged in an open clash with the Brotherhood’s Syrian branch. The Iraq-Iran War only further inflamed Sunni Islamist animosity across the region against the revolutionary Iranian state. The Brotherhood was initially critical of Iraq for launching the war against Iran, but then turned against Tehran when it extended the war in the hopes of toppling the Iraqi regime and occupying Iraqi territories. For many in the Brotherhood, Iran appeared increasingly to be a nationalist and sectarian power, and hardly the champion of Islamic cause that it had hoped and expected from the self-proclaimed Islamic Republic.

Events of the 1980s thus infused a new acrimony into the Brotherhood’s relations with Iran. Ayatollah Khalkhali, the chief of Iran’s revolutionary courts, reportedly referred to the Brotherhood then as “the devil’s brethren.” In 1987, Shaykh Said al-Hawa, the prominent Syrian Muslim Brotherhood scholar and leader, published his book *Khomeinism: Deviation in Faith and Deviation in Positions*. Most recently, relations between the Brotherhood and Iran have become further strained since the Second Gulf War, when the Brotherhood took Iran to task for not coming to Iraq’s aid against the West, and then for supporting the Iraqi Shia uprising against Saddam.

Nowadays, the Shiite question remains a deeply controversial and divisive issue within the Brotherhood, especially as a consequence of recent developments related to Iran’s growing power. These developments include Iran’s quest for regional hegemony at the expense of the traditional regional powers, Saudi Arabia and Egypt;
Iran’s efforts to spread its influence into Arab societies; and Iran’s re-emergence as a major player, through her proxies, in key regional trouble spots—including most notably Iraq, Palestine and Lebanon. The Brotherhood is torn as a whole over the Shiite question between, on the one hand, its identity as a pan-Islamic movement that desires unity with Iran to advance its agenda, and on the other, its identity as a distinctly Sunni and Arab movement that not only operates within unique socio-political contexts, but that has reason to be suspicious and even hostile to Shiite power. The outcome of this intra-Brotherhood debate, which has both a political and a religious dimension, will have an important impact both on the Brotherhood’s future as well as Iran’s own prospects in the region.

The Brotherhood and Iranian Power

In recent years, while seeking to expand its power and influence in the Middle East, Iran has sought to portray and position itself as the leader of a unified Islamic resistance bloc against what’s widely regarded in the region as the “American-Zionist project.” The Egyptian Brotherhood, for its part, has played an important role in helping facilitate Iran’s political and religious expansion in the region.

For example, Iran’s strategy to spread its influence in Sunni Arab societies might have been seriously hampered if regional politics were framed (as Wahhabi scholars are prone to do) along Shia-Sunni lines, or along Persian-Arab lines. But the Egyptian Brotherhood’s vocal support for Iran has tended to lend credence to the pan-Islamist argument that the real fault line in the region isn’t between Muslims (i.e., between Sunni and Shia), or for that matter, between ethnic groups (i.e., between Arabs and Persians). Rather, the defining regional political issue is the struggle between Islam and the West, or as it is more commonly put in Brotherhood rhetoric, between those who support “the American-Zionist project for the region” and those who resist it, including Iran and her allies in the “Resistance” bloc.

In the view of the Egyptian Brotherhood—the “mother” movement of the Brotherhood, which poses a serious domestic challenge to the future of the Egyptian regime, and whose leadership still exercises considerable influence over other regional Brotherhood branches—Iran is generally seen as the leader of the regional Islamic struggle against the U.S. and Israel. Iran has sought to win support in the Arab world through its support of the Palestinian cause and of Hamas. More broadly, however, Iran is seen by elements of the Brotherhood as a partner in the long-term struggle to dismantle the regional order of secular Arab states, as well as in the Islamic struggle for Egypt itself. For its part, Iran has been interested in weakening the Arab states in order to advance her regional dominance, whereas the Brotherhood has
always sought to weaken the Arab state to improve its chances to acquire influence and set up a sharia state.

The Egyptian Brotherhood’s support for Iran in recent years has also been partly a function of the movement’s own domestic difficulties. Since its successes in the parliamentary elections in late 2005, the organization has come under relentless pressure from the Mubarak regime, which has imprisoned senior Ikwhani leaders, cracked down on its financial and charitable networks, and implemented legislation that further restricts its access to electoral processes. Iran has helped the Brotherhood by seeking to delegitimize and embarrass the Mubarak regime. For example, during the Gaza War (December 2008-January 2009), Iran first sought to instigate the war—against Egyptian state interests—and then launched propaganda attacks against the Egyptian regime over its policies during the war, which were portrayed as being against Islamic interests and accommodating toward Israel. Hezbollah’s leader, Hassan Nasrallah, continued this line of attack when he urged the Egyptian people and the commanders of its armed forces to disobey their government regarding Gaza.6

In response to this, the Brotherhood’s General Guide Muhammad Mahdi Akif took the course of championing Iran and Hezbollah during the Gaza War. He further rejected the charge leveled by some in the Arab world that Iran was merely using the Palestinian cause and Hamas to achieve regional objectives, including its goal of currying regional goodwill and support for its nuclear ambitions. There are two political agendas at play in the region, Akif said. One agenda calls for capitulation to the West and to Israel, and this agenda is followed not only by the Egyptian regime but by other Arabs who unwittingly support Israel by worrying instead about Iran’s regional ambitions. The other agenda is that of “the Resistance axis,” which calls for resistance and jihad to drive away the Jewish state and the West. The Brotherhood, Akif said, is avowedly a part of this second agenda, as is its leading advocate, Iran. Who is wrong in the crisis of Gaza, asked Akif, Iran or the Arabs? “It is Iran who is noble, manly and humane and helps miserable people who are besieged by the Arabs,”7 he said.

The Egyptian Brotherhood’s position on Iran soon became more muddled in early 2009, when a Hezbollah cell was discovered in Egypt. In the Egyptian national debate that ensued over Iran’s growing presence, the Brotherhood’s position on Iranian power within Egypt became more ambiguous. The Brotherhood’s Guidance Bureau initially dismissed the whole issue and supported Nasrallah. General Guide Akif repeated his argument about the “two agendas” in the region—that of Islamic resistance, and that of capitulation. Yet for other Brotherhood officials, the Hezbollah cell presented an infringement on Egypt’s sovereignty. They criticized Hezbollah for failing to coordinate its efforts in Gaza with the Egyptian government in the first
place, and Brotherhood parliament deputies declared that Egypt’s national security constitutes a “red line” that should never be violated, because “Egypt comes first.” The Brotherhood’s leadership issued a communiqué that lauded Hezbollah for its assistance to “the resistance” in Palestine. It stressed, however, that there was no contradiction between that support and the organization’s commitment to Egypt’s national security.

This back and forth reflected the inherent tension that exists within the Brotherhood between, on the one hand, its identity as a pan-Islamic movement that adheres to an ideology that doesn’t recognize the legitimacy of nation states, and, on the other hand, its Sunni Arab identity and claim to be an Egyptian political party with a national agenda. Meanwhile, the regional political contest between Sunnis and Shiites will likely keep this internal division over the movement’s identity at the forefront of intra-Brotherhood debates. Most recently, as Saudi Arabia has been drawn into the Yemeni Zeidi al-Huthi insurgency, which is widely believed to be supported by Iran, the Brotherhood has come out in support of the Huthis; it has called upon the Saudi King to immediately halt the Saudi military offensive launched to push the Huthis back across the border.

Meanwhile, in Syria, where the Brotherhood is officially illegal and membership in the movement is punishable by death, the Brotherhood’s response to Iran has been much more straightforward. The Syrian Brothers view Iran as the closest ally of the Assad regime, and hence, as complicit in their subjugation. As such, they have fiercely criticized Iran’s Shiite missionary activities in Syria and have accused the Syrian regime of allowing the country to be turned into an Iranian province. The Syrian Brotherhood has also been critical of Iran’s nuclear project, and has denounced Iran’s stated territorial ambitions in Bahrain.

In early 2009, when it became clear that the Obama administration was seeking engagement with Damascus rather than regime change there, the Brotherhood, which operates in exile, sought a détente with the regime in the hope that it would be allowed to return to Syria. It announced that, in view of the Gaza War, it had suspended its opposition activities, and then walked out of the main Syrian opposition grouping, the National Salvation Front. Yet in November 2009 the Syrian Brotherhood announced that its “truce” with the regime and the suspension of its opposition activities were over. And unlike the Egyptian Brotherhood, it came out fiercely against the al-Huthi insurgency in southern Arabia, depicting it as part of a wider project to invade and destabilize the Arab states.

In Lebanon, the Brotherhood-affiliated Islamic Group (al-Jamaah Islamiyyah), which is led by the prominent scholar Shaykh Faisal Mawlawi, has been allied with the Sunni establishment associated with the Hariri family. It formed part of Saad Hariri’s anti-Syrian “March 14 Alliance,” and has been openly critical of both Hezbollah...
and Iran. In late 2006, when Hezbollah launched its campaign to topple the “March 14” government, Shaykh Mawlawi condemned Hezbollah, claiming that Iran had started to implement its grand plan of expanding its influence in the region, and that Hezbollah had proven to be a part of this plan. Moreover, following Hezbollah’s military humiliation of the Sunnis and Druze of the March 14 Alliance in May 2008, Shaykh Mawlawi stated that the “Islamic Resistance” was now in the service of sectarian and political projects.

By contrast, Hezbollah was vocally supported by Shaykh Fathi Yakan, a well known Brotherhood thinker and preacher and former leader of the Egyptian movement al-Jamaah al-Islamiyyah. In 2005, Yakan formed and led a rival to al-Jamaah al-Islamiyyah called the “Islamic Action Front,” a coalition of Sunni groups whose power base was in Tripoli, in the stronghold of Sunni opponents of the Hariri family. Shaykh Yakan stated that he was proud of being an ally “of all the free and noble people in the world,” including Hamas, Hezbollah, Syria, Iran, and (after it voiced its support for Hamas in the 2008-2009 Gaza war) Turkey. He also denied charges that Shiite leadership of the “resistance movement” to Western hegemony in the Middle East was having the effect of turning Sunnis into Shias. On December 8, 2006, Yakan led, as the Imam, the Friday prayer of the Shiites who were laying siege to the offices of the “March 14” Prime Minister Siniora. (Yakan died on June 13, 2009.)

The attitude of the Jordanian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood toward Iran in recent years has reflected the fact that Jordan is flanked by the Palestinian-Israeli conflict to its West and the sectarian conflict between Shias and Sunnis in Iraq to its East. The organization has traditionally promoted the view of Iran as an allied Islamist force that has been unjustly targeted by the West. Because of the Jordanian Brotherhood’s deep connections to Hamas, it has highly valued and praised Iran’s support for the Palestinians, and it has also supported Iran’s nuclear aspirations. During the 2006 war in Lebanon, the Jordanian Brothers organized mass demonstrations in support of Hezbollah, and after the war it supported the Lebanese opposition camp against the “March 14” government.

At the same time, the Jordanian Brotherhood supported Saddam Hussein’s regime, deplored its collapse, and accused Iran of facilitating the US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq as well as the plight of Iraqi Sunnis. It was totally opposed to the Shia-led Iraqi government, and supported the Sunni insurgency and rebellion against the ascendant Shiite majority in Iraq. Recently it denounced Iran’s claims for Bahrain, and a newspaper affiliated with Jordan’s Brotherhood bitterly criticized Iran’s treatment of its Sunni population.

The views of the Iraqi branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, known as the “Islamic Party,” have been largely critical of Iranian involvement in their country and of the country’s new Shiite majority. At the same time, they have participated in the post-
Saddam political process and urged their supporters early on to join the new Iraqi army and police. Their leader—Tariq al-Hashimi—has served as Vice President of Iraq. The argument behind the Islamic Party’s decision to participate fully in Iraqi political life, in spite of the Shiite dominance and the state of occupation, was that Iraq was caught between two occupations—one led by America, and the other by Iran and the Shia. The Iranian-Shiite occupation was considered so dangerous to the Sunni Islamic Party that they argued it was necessary for Sunnis to integrate as fully as possible in state institutions in order to reduce Shia domination. So far, this policy has held, even though some Islamists see it as legitimating the American occupation.24

Finally, the Brotherhood offshoot Hamas’s alliance with Iran has been rooted in Iran’s need for a powerful Palestinian asset giving her a major say in the Palestines issue and, by extension, in Arab affairs. Hamas has taken advantage of this Iranian need. But Hamas has gone beyond being an Iranian ally. Khalid Mashaal, Hamas’s top leader, has made gestures signifying that Hamas is effectively under Iran’s command. Mashaal, for example, told the Iranian Parliament that he had presented a report on the Gaza War to Iran’s Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, “the ruler of the Muslims” (waliy amr al-muslimin).25 In this and other statements, Mashaal lent credence to the claim made by Iran that Hamas was not only an Iranian asset or ally, but an Iranian creation. For example, Muhammad Akhtari, who was for years Iran’s man in Syria and Lebanon, claimed that Hamas (and also the Palestinian Islamic Jihad) was formed and inspired by Imam Khomeini and by the regional Islamic resistance movement that he established. Based on this logic, the Palestinian resistance, just like Hezbollah, is the legal son of the Islamic Republic.26

Yet on the Shiite question, it is clear that Hamas, like the Brotherhood as a whole, remains divided. Mashaal’s expressions of loyalty to Iran raised concerns inside Hamas that he was alienating the organization’s Sunni-Arab supporters. As a consequence, senior Hamas figures in Gaza asserted that Hamas did not recognize Khamenei as the ruler of the Muslims.2 They further claimed that there is a strong pro-Arab trend inside Hamas, which is interested in strengthening the movement’s Sunni character and its existing ties with countries like Egypt and Saudi Arabia.28

The Shia Conversion Controversy

The growth of Iranian power in recent years has helped to inflame the historically-rooted political and ideological rivalry between some streams of Sunnism and Shiism. This has been further fueled by popular fears among sectors of the Arab Sunni populations that Iran is trying to convert Sunnis to Shiism as a way of furthering its political agenda of regional domination. These fears have generated a great deal
of controversy within the Brotherhood movement and the Sunni world in general.

In some ways, the Egyptian Brotherhood’s efforts to downplay Sunni-Shia religious differences in the spirit of Islamist unity and resistance have helped make this religious controversy within the Sunni world possible. For instance, by dismissing as secondary the religious differences between Shiites and Sunnis, and by arguing that Twelver Shia are Muslims and that Twelver Shiism is the fifth school of jurisprudence, elements of the Egyptian Brotherhood have effectively supplied an ideological counterbalance to the Wahhabi-Salafi campaign to vilify the Shia and Iran. Over time, this proactive Islamist ecumenicism has helped make it seem acceptable for Sunnis not only to identify politically with Iran, but also to be open to Shia dawa (proselytization).

In the debate among the Sunnis over Iran and the phenomenon of Sunni conversions to Shiism, neither Iran’s supporters nor its detractors have seriously denied that “Shiitization” (tashiyi) or conversions to Shiism among Sunni populations is taking place. They’ve also not denied the doctrinal divergences between Sunnism and Shiism. Iran’s detractors in the Sunni world have warned that Iran’s efforts to spread Shiism pose a clear and present threat to Arab-Sunni societies, and have sought to stress the fundamental nature of Sunni-Shiite doctrinal differences. But Iran’s Sunni advocates have dismissed the importance of Iran’s efforts to spread Shiism, and have described doctrinal divergences between Sunni and Shia as insignificant.

The attack on Iran’s conversion campaign has been led to a large extent by Shaykh Yusuf al-Qaradawi. A former senior member of the Egyptian Brotherhood and one of the movement’s leading ideologues, Qaradawi is often described as the “spiritual guide” of the Brotherhood. He claims to have declined past offers to assume the position of the General Guide because he considers himself as “the Guide of the Muslim Nation” as a whole (murshid al-ummah). In this way, he often competes directly with the Brotherhood’s Egyptian leaders for influence within the movement. This intra-Brotherhood rivalry has clearly been a contributing factor to the divided opinions within the movement regarding the Shiism question and the controversy surrounding Shia conversion.

Qaradawi has traditionally adhered to an ecumenical approach toward the Shiite question. He has advocated for rapprochement (taqrīb) between the Sunni and Shiite revivalist movements, and has argued that while differences between Sunni and Shia do in fact exist, they pertain to matters of jurisprudence that are of secondary importance to the principles of faith. During the 2006 Lebanon war, Qaradawi was a vocal defender of Hezbollah—a position he took against fatwas issued by Saudi Wahhabi scholars that forbade supporting the Shiite militia movement. Qaradawi has also championed Iran’s right to acquire peaceful nuclear technology and has claimed that Iran’s nuclear capability would not pose a threat to the security and interests of Gulf Arab states.
Despite this ecumenical track record, however, Qaradawi became a fierce critic of Iran and the Shia in the summer of 2006, in the aftermath of the war between Israel and Hezbollah. At the time, Qaradawi launched a vicious attack on the Shia, accusing them of trying to penetrate Egypt and other predominantly Sunni societies and to convert their people to Shiism. The motives behind Qaradawi’s reversal subsequently became clearer when he denounced the Shia for trying to exploit what was perceived region-wide as a Hezbollah victory over Israel and to use this to their political advantage. Moreover, for the first time, Qaradawi also denounced the Shiites for their religious beliefs and practices, claiming that most Shiites believe that the Koran is imperfect (tahrif al-Quran) and seek to curry favor with Allah by cursing the Prophet’s Companions (sabb al-Sahabah). At a conference to promote Sunni-Shia reconciliation in Iraq that was held in Doha on January 20-22, 2007, he subsequently reiterated his attack on Iran’s efforts to spread Shiism in the region. He made a similar attack in an interview to the official Arabic website of the Egyptian MB in July 2008.

Qaradawi’s string of anti-Shia pronouncements from 2006-2008 met with little controversy in Egypt and elsewhere. It is therefore unclear why remarks Qaradawi made in an interview in the Egyptian daily al-Masri al-Yaum in September 2008, where he once again criticized Iran’s proselytizing efforts, generated the heated controversy that it did. In that interview, Qaradawi first criticized Wahhabi preachers for their fanaticism, and then he took aim at the Shia. He claimed that the latter may be considered Muslims, but that they are mubtadiun—or, those who introduce unauthorized innovations to Islam. He argued further that Shiites are endangering Sunni societies by trying to infiltrate them, and he called on Sunnis to defend their societies against the Shiite “invasion” (ghazu). Qaradawi moreover enumerated the points of difference in the religious doctrines of Sunnism and Shiism.

This time, there was a fierce Iranian reaction to Qaradawi’s interview, which only led the Sunni shaykh to ramp-up his invectives against Iran. This, in turn, set off a much larger dispute among religious scholars in Egypt and elsewhere in the region. Many Sunni scholars spoke out in support of Qaradawi and denounced what they saw as Iran’s campaign to convert Sunnis to Shiism. But other Sunni scholars criticized him for raising the issue in the first place.

Internally, the Muslim Brotherhood movement throughout the region was sharply divided on whether to come to Qaradawi’s side in this dispute or not. Several Brotherhood organizations and scholars have been critical of Iranian influence in their societies, and they naturally rallied behind Qaradawi. For example, the Controller General of the Syrian Brotherhood, Ali Sadr al-Din al-Bayanuni, complained that Iran seeks to spread Shiism everywhere in the Muslim world, adding that Syria has been singled out for Shiite proselytizing because of Iran’s political alliance with the Syrian regime. Iran’s project of spreading Shiism, Bayanuni said, and Iran’s...
influence in Syria pose a clear danger not only for Sunni Syrian society but for all the states in the region.38

The Muslim Brotherhood affiliate based in Iran itself, “The Group of the Call to Islam and of Reform” (Jamaat al-Dawah wal-Islah), reportedly supported Qaradawi and criticized both Iranian Shia conversion attempts and the Egyptian Brotherhood for its support of Iran and for its failure to condemn Iran’s treatment of her own Sunnis.39 The Controller General of the Jordanian Brotherhood, Shaykh Humam Said, criticized the Shia for some of their beliefs and practices, like the Imams’ infallibility and the cursing of the Companions. He denounced what he saw as Shia expansionism and predicted that a rapprochement between Sunnis and Shias would never materialize.40 Rashid al-Ghannushi, the prominent Islamic scholar and ideological leader of the Brotherhood-affiliated Tunisian al-Nahda movement fully supported Qaradawi’s positions.41

Other Brothers, however, have defended Iran and the Shia. The Egyptian Brotherhood’s leadership has consistently sought to avoid entanglement in the Sunni-Shia controversy and have downplayed Shia efforts to convert Sunnis as marginal.42 They have further claimed that Sunni-Shia strife has been instigated by the U.S. as a way of dividing Muslims; Sunnis and Shias, they argue, comprise one Muslim Nation that must unite in order to confront “the American Zionist project that seeks to eradicate Islam.”43 During the 2006 Lebanon War, General Guide Akif declared that Hezbollah has successfully led the resistance against Israel and therefore the Brotherhood should recognize Hezbollah’s leadership in that struggle. The arguments between Sunnis and Shias, he stressed, must be suspended until after the battle with the common Zionist enemy ends with the Arabs regaining all their rights, because that battle must take precedence over any other issue.44 Akif has also said that he supports Iran’s President Ahmadinejad because of his steadfast efforts to resist American hegemony in the Middle East.45

After Qardawi’s 2008 al-Masri al-Yaum interview, Akif stiffly rebuked Qaradawi, saying that whoever speaks of an Iranian agenda to penetrate and dominate the region speaks in the language of the Muslim Nation’s enemies.46 He declared also that he had no objection to Shiite expansionism, because compared to the 56 Sunni states, there is only a single Shia state, Iran, and there is nothing to fear about it.47 Akif’s first deputy, Dr. Muhammad Habib, also reacted to Qaradawi’s statements by stating: “Which is more worthy of warning from, the Shia expansion and Iranian danger, or the Zionist danger? There are priorities, Dr. Qaradawi.”48

Nothing perhaps could serve Iran better than the fact that the defense of the Shia, and the appeal to stop the Sunni-Shia debate and to close Muslim ranks, have been made by Qaradawi’s own former comrades and disciples. When Muhammad Habib, the First Deputy to the General Guide, said sarcastically, “There are priorities, Dr. Qaradawi,” he was referring to a central theme in Qaradawi’s own scholarly work,
“The Jurisprudence of Priorities” (*fiqh al-awlawiyyat*). Qaradawi’s critics have clearly set an order of political priorities in direct opposition to his own. Unlike him, they give priority to the struggle with “the American-Zionist project” over whatever differences they may have with Iran and the Shiites.

This dilemma regarding which conflict takes priority—the conflict with Israel or the one with the Shia—is not unique to the Brotherhood. During the 2006 Lebanon War, Saudi Salafi shaykhs were divided over whether Muslims should support Hezbollah against the Israelis. The well-known Sahwah (“Awakening”) leader, Sheikh Salman al-Awdah, supported Hezbollah and rejected the anti-Hezbollah *fatwa* of Sheikh Jabrin. It can be argued that Sheikh Awdah’s position reflects the *Ikhwani* influence on his generation of Saudi Salafi thinkers.

As for the question of religious doctrinal divergences between Sunnis and Shias, the standard Muslim Brotherhood position has been that the Shia are Muslims for all intents and purposes, and that the differences between Sunnis and Shiites pertain to matters of jurisprudence which are of secondary importance, not to principles of faith. But this general formula, which was once Qaradawi’s position also, became insufficient in view of the Shia conversion debate and Qaradawi’s attacks on Shia beliefs and practices. An internal debate has emerged, reflecting a deep division within the organization on this matter.

One side of the debate was presented in an article posted on the Egyptian Brotherhood’s official Arabic website and signed by Yusuf Nada, a senior Brotherhood official. Nada originally set up the Brotherhood’s relations with the Iranian revolutionary regime in 1979 and has maintained close contacts within Iran ever since. In his article, Nada minimized the differences between Sunnis and Shias and refuted many of the criticisms leveled by Sunnis against the Shias. The Brotherhood’s position, Nada wrote, is that Twelver Shiism is recognized as the fifth school of Islamic jurisprudence. Twelver Shiism differs from the four Sunni schools not in matters of faith, which are fundamental to Islam and required of all true believers, but in matters of jurisprudence. These matters are of secondary importance and are a source of disagreement among the four Sunni schools as well. Noticeably, Nada made no mention of Iran’s proselytizing efforts in the region.

A rebuttal of Nada’s article was offered by Mahmud Ghuzlan, a member of the Brotherhood’s Guidance Bureau, which is the highest executive body under the General Guide. Ghuzlan accused Nada of absolving the Shia of the various faults that have been attributed to them by the consensus of Sunni scholars. He also accused Nada of misrepresenting the Brotherhood’s position on the Shia. The high esteem Iran has gained throughout the region because of its leadership in resisting the West, Ghuzlan wrote, has encouraged Iran to attempt to further penetrate the states in the region by spreading Shiite ideology. The aim of this Shiite proselytizing efforts is to
turn the people’s political solidarity with Iran into a deeper loyalty and religious affiliation. This is what prompted Shaykh Qaradawi to launch his attacks on the Shia. “We,” Ghuzlan wrote, “agree with the essence of Qaradawi’s critique of the Shia. The Brotherhood prefers not to enter into religious polemics in order to preserve the unity of the Muslim Nation, but Iran should respect that approach too and not take advantage of it by acting to spread Shiism.”

Following this exchange between Nada and Ghuzlan, General Guide Akif weighed in on the intra-Brotherhood dispute, claiming that Nada’s article represented only his personal views and not those of the movement. Yet in fact, Nada’s views reflected the views of many within the Brotherhood’s leadership, and it was reported that Akif was actually behind the publication of Nada’s article, against opposition from members of the Guidance Bureau. As this debate went on, and Nada accused Ghuzlan of embracing a takfiri approach toward the Shia, Ghuzlan argued that all the members of the Guidance Bureau had rejected Nada’s position. Akif subsequently chimed in again, declaring that both Nada and Ghuzlan were expressing their own personal views and that neither one expressed the view of the Guidance Bureau. Quite obviously, the Bureau itself was divided on this issue.

The Brotherhood and the Crisis of the Iranian Regime

As this intra-brotherhood debate over Iran’s proselytizing in Sunni-Arab states has continued to fester, the government-led crackdown within Iran following the disputed presidential elections in June 2009 generated a further disagreement within the Brotherhood that posed yet another dilemma for the Brotherhood’s leadership. In the interests of Islamic solidarity, the leadership probably would have preferred not to have to criticize the Iranian regime. But remaining silent while the Iranian government was criticized everywhere else in the region for its harsh suppression of internal dissent made silence for the Brotherhood increasingly difficult. Moreover, had the Brotherhood’s leadership remained silent, it would have been taken as a sign affirming the arguments of the Brotherhood’s critics—that the movement, despite claiming to have reformed itself, is not really committed to fair elections and democracy.

In any case, there is a divergence of views within the Brotherhood about how to respond to Iran’s crackdown. At the heart of this was a disagreement within the Brotherhood over the nature of the Islamic regime in Iran. Iran’s constitution and its state structure, argued Dr. Issam al-Aryan, who represents the reformist trend in
the Egyptian Brotherhood, must undergo a fundamental reform. This sweeping reform will require a redistribution of powers among Iran’s presidency, the parliament, the military and the people, who are to be represented by political parties. Furthermore, the Khomeinist doctrine of the Guardianship of the Jurist (velayat-e faqih) needs to be thoroughly re-assessed, while the theocratic institutions that have been built around this principle should be treated merely as symbolic and limited in their authority. At the same time the powers of the Revolutionary Guard Corps should be subject to a review. Aryan also urged Iran’s leaders to shed the Shia and Persian-nationalist character of the Iranian state.56

The turmoil within Iran has also forced a reappraisal of what most have seen as Iran’s growing power and influence in recent years. One commentator argued on the official Arabic language website of the Egyptian Brotherhood57 that Iran’s bid to dominate the region has been thwarted. The Shia minorities in the Gulf states have failed to expand their power; Muqtada al-Sadr’s Mahdi Army in Iraq has been successfully reined in; the activities of the Revolutionary Guard’s al-Qods force from Iraq to Oman and Yemen have been undercut; Hezbollah was roundly defeated in the recent Lebanese elections; and Hamas is still besieged in Gaza.

Despite these calls for reform within Iran, other Brotherhood members defended the regime and pleaded with Sunni Arabs to support it. One article that appeared on the Egyptian Brotherhood’s website five days after the Iranian elections claimed that the country should be proud of its honest elections and the ordered transfer of power within the regime.58 Iran is a strong Islamic state, which is not ruled by corruption and electoral rigging, and it is a power respected around the world, claimed the author of the article. Moreover, the Arabs who criticize Iran, and who ignite controversy and conflict between Sunni and Shia, do so in order to divert attention from their own political failures and incapacity to stage an Islamist struggle. Had the Arabs supported the Islamic resistance in Iraq, Iran would not have intervened there; had they formed a strong Sunni Islamist resistance in Lebanon, Hezbollah would not have been the only armed resistance there; and had they embraced Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Iran would have had no foothold in Gaza and the West Bank.

As this controversy came to a boil, the movement’s leadership eventually decided to announce its own position.59 They stated that “events in Iran are a purely internal matter and concern only the Iranians.” They further rejected “any foreign intervention in Iran’s affairs, especially by the US, Western Europe and the Zionists”—a statement obviously intended as an endorsement of the Iranian regime’s contention that its internal dissent was being fomented by outsiders. The Brotherhood leadership further affirmed “the right of peoples to elect their representatives and rulers in complete freedom and to choose the regimes and constitutions which rule them without anyone’s interference.”
This affirmation might be regarded as somewhat of a concession to the reform-minded critics of the Iranian regime within the movement’s ranks. But the Brotherhood leadership did not criticize the regime explicitly. Instead, it effectively endorsed the regime’s justification for cracking down on internal dissent by insisting that it is either solely an internal affair to the Islamic Republic, or that the dissent is being fomented by non-Muslim outsiders.

Conclusion

As the Islamic Republic of Iran attempts to spread its influence throughout the Arab and Muslim worlds, the Muslim Brotherhood’s political and ideological support of the Shiite state has proven to be an important Iranian asset. When leaders of the Egyptian Brotherhood downplay the religious differences between Shias and Sunnis, and argue that Twelver Shiism should be recognized as an acceptably orthodox school of Islamic jurisprudence, they effectively serve as counterbalance to the Wahhabi/Salafi-led campaign to vilify Shiism, as well as nationalist Arab efforts to contest Iran’s growing political power. In this way, the Brotherhood’s ecumenical approach has helped make it acceptable for Sunni Arabs to align themselves politically with Iran, and it appears that it has also made Sunni societies increasingly more open to Shiite religious proselytizing.

In the future, how far might the Egyptian Brotherhood go in supporting Iranian interests? During the Gaza War, the Brotherhood was careful not to cross the regime’s “red lines” in its protests and demonstrations. It pursued its strategy according to which, as long as the movement has not reached the stage when it can seize power, it should avoid taking steps that could put its very survival at risk. These, then, are the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood’s priorities: The joint struggle with Iran against “the American-Zionist project” takes precedence over religious or ethnic divergences with her. However, the survival of the organization is the highest priority.

It is within this context that the intra-Brotherhood political and religious debate surrounding the Shiite question should be considered. The pro-Iranian element within the Brotherhood will, in all likelihood, continue to support Iran as long as the reason for that support exists—namely, for as long as Iran continues to play the same regional role she has in recent years, as a champion of Islamic interests and as the leader of the regional “resistance.” The Brotherhood’s underlying motivation to support Iran will likely diminish, however, if Iran abandons this leadership role and shifts from confrontation with the US to accommodation with it. To be sure, Iran’s territorial claims regarding Arab states and growing concerns over Shia conversion efforts, reflected in the divided internal debate in the Egyptian Brotherhood on that
issue, will make the Brotherhood’s alliance with Iran uneasy and, at times, strained. But the Brotherhood-Iran relationship will not end so long as the latter’s regional role does not change.

NOTES

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21. Ibid.
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34. “Mutamar al-Dawhah Yatahawwal li-Sijal bayna al-Sunnah wal-Shiah,”
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