The Islamization of Arab Culture

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The political and ideological impact of the Muslim Brotherhood is most noticeable in two countries. In Egypt, the birthplace of the movement, it represents—eight decades after its founding—the main opposition to an authoritarian government. And in Palestine its local incarnation, Hamas, plays the dual role of an elected, albeit contested, government and a “resistance” movement with a self-granted license to engage in homicidal actions against combatants and noncombatants alike. The influence of the Muslim Brotherhood, however, far exceeds such visible manifestations. It has profoundly affected Arab political culture, and the consequences of its activism and ideology on the political evolution of modern Arab nation-states—Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and others—is still unfolding. This essay attempts to describe the nature of the movement’s influence and to examine its particular impact on Syria and Lebanon.

Currently, parties and organizations that stem intellectually and institutionally from the Muslim Brotherhood present themselves as “centrists.” They contend that their embrace of Islamism—the proposition that Islam as a religion encompasses the political realm—sets them apart from both secular groups and radical Islamist groups. Secular liberals, nationalists and leftists reject any role for religion in the political realm, they say, while radical Islamists forcefully reject any political system not explicitly rooted in Islamic law and tradition. This claim to centrism has won support from outside the Muslim Brotherhood as well. Some local forces see in the movement positive potential for opposing the authoritarian status quo, and some advocates of democratization highlight its bona fide respect for the ballot as a means of accession to political power. In discussions about how to break the stranglehold...
that radical Islamism has over a large span of Arab political culture, the Muslim Brotherhood is even proposed as a suitable ally in efforts to counter the radical expressions of Islamism.

Yet history does not support this benign assessment of the Muslim Brotherhood movement, which in its multiple incarnations in the Arab world has clearly contributed to the radicalization of political culture. Virtually all radical Islamist ideas now in circulation in the Arab realm can be traced back, directly or indirectly, to the incubating environment of the Muslim Brotherhood. While Arab governments’ repressive measures against Islamists seeking political participation may have helped provoke political radicalization, this process was effectively preordained by the Muslim Brotherhood’s own conception of political activity. The Brotherhood understands participatory and electoral politics not as an intrinsic reflection of the democratic character of the political system, but as means to an end—that end being the “Islamization” (aslamah) of society and the individual and the “restoration” of the “Islamic State.”¹ The concept of a revolving assumption of political power is noticeably absent from the Muslim Brotherhood political program.

The distinction between the Muslim Brotherhood and its radical rivals is, nonetheless, substantive. Since the end of the Afghan Jihad, two distinct approaches to Islamization—one “top down,” the other “bottom up”—have been in competition within Arab Islamist circles. The top-down approach is promoted by those who hold that the creation of the “Islamic State” is a prerequisite for the “Islamization” of institutions, society, and the individual. Such a state must be established promptly, therefore, and by any means necessary. (This approach is the modus operandi of the al-Qaeda network.) The bottom-up approach, by contrast, is favored by those who believe that the creation of the new “Muslim Man” is necessary for the Islamization of society, institutions and state. It is the apparent compatibility of the latter approach—espoused by the mainstream organizations of the Muslim Brotherhood movement—with democratic practice that constitutes the basis for the claim of “moderation” and “centrism,” and the origin of diverse positive assessments of the movement and its local components.²

And yet, what remains common to both approaches, and accepted as an element of virtual consensus in Islamist circles, is the stipulation that Islam, as a comprehensive system, necessitates the underlying Islamization sought by Islamists. The widespread acceptance of this notion—one with such ambiguous content—is, in fact, a considerable achievement that can be largely credited to Muslim Brotherhood activism.
Contrasting Historical Views

The historical record of Muslim societies can be read in two different ways: normative and empirical. The normative reading accepts a priori the notion that there is one Muslim global community (Umma) endowed with one central authority (Khilafa or Caliphate), the legitimacy of which derives solely from its status as successor to the rule of the Prophet. History is, therefore, the account of the fulfillment of, and aberrations from, this ideal. In the maximalist version of this normative reading, the fulfillment begins with the Prophet’s flight from Mecca to Medina in 622 and doesn’t end until 1924 with the overthrow of the last Ottoman sultan, who held the Caliphate title. The aberration of an Umma without a Khilafa has lasted, accordingly, just a little over eight decades. In the minimalist version, the fulfillment was a brief period of fewer than four decades, from 622 to the end of the reign of the fourth Rightly-Guided Caliph in 661, and all subsequent history has been a succession of aberrations. Elemental antecedents to these two modern versions of the normative readings are rooted in the scholastic tradition of Islamic jurisprudence, with the understanding that supports the maximalist version being more prominent.3

The philological efforts of Western Orientalists, relying primarily on the output of the scholastic tradition—and corresponding chronologically to the reordering of the political forms of Muslim societies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—provided a textually biased view favoring the normative reading. Islamist thinkers today still productively utilize this work to confirm components of their own ideology. More significantly, the notion that Arab-Islamic civilization had a Golden Age that should be emulated and restored—a view that became prevalent in the nineteenth century Nahdah, or Arabian renaissance period—contributed to the idea that the present day is an aberration. This concept has been subsequently modified and amplified by Islamist theoreticians.

An empirical reading of Muslim history reveals a considerably more nuanced reality. Contrary to Islamic scholars’ scarce descriptions of—and/or prescriptions for—an Islamic political model that established a template for the rule of the Khilafah government, the Umma was historically divided into a multiplicity of Islamic states overwhelmingly dominated by dynastic rule. The nature of the relationship between the rulers and the ruled in these states was based on either coercive force or paternalism and quasi-filial loyalism. Even the latter was largely adversarial. While granting obligatory recognition to the autocratic ruling powers, the subjects of the Muslim states were primarily concerned with reducing their dual burden of taxation and conscription. Islam, meanwhile, served to cement the relationship between state and
society through ritualistic practices that fostered pietism and justified the political quietism that dominated much of the Muslim environment.

Dynastic paternalism, in fact—though virtually ignored by the scant political reflections of classical Islamic thinkers—has provided consistent and productive rule in the history of the Muslim state. Only the brief episode of the first four Caliphs partially deviated from this pattern. (The first two Caliphs were the Prophet’s fathers-in-law, the last two his sons-in-law; the Prophet himself had no male heir.) The fourth Caliph, Ali, sought to formalize dynastic paternalism to the advantage of his progeny, and his failure to do so led to the strict dynastic theological paternalism of Twelver Shiism. Among Sunnis, however, the dynastic paternalism model has not been seriously challenged since the advent of the Umayyads in the late seventh century. Even the Mamluk slave-soldier state that emerged in the thirteenth century kept dynastic paternalism as a referential framework, with the Abbasid Caliphs providing the nominal façade. With the Ottoman conquest of the Muslim heartland in the sixteenth century, actual dynastic paternalism was restored.

In the twentieth-century nation-state system, the Arab state emerged in both its monarchic and “republican” versions as a direct continuation of dynastic paternalism, modified—often merely in form—to yield a statist paternalism. In statist paternalism the dynasty is replaced, in some aspects, by the nation-state. The etymology of the word *dawlah* is revealing: in modern Arabic usage it refers to “state;” in pre-modern usage it indicates “dynasty.”

“Islamization”—understood as the application of the Islamic template to state and society—is the foundational base of the political program advocated by the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist groups. And it is, significantly, a distinctly novel concept. It seeks to alter the two main aspects of political and social life historically practiced by Muslim communities: dynastic paternalism (and by extension statist paternalism) and pietism. Dynastic paternalism is to be replaced by an unspecified political system supposedly derived from Islamic ideals, while the traditional, conservative, syncretistic, and diverse manifestations of pietism are to be replaced by prescriptive regimentation and militancy. The inclusive, “total” system that coalesced around Islamic faith and culture is to be superseded by a totalitarian regime having, as its immediate or delayed mission, global expansion.

The Muslim Brotherhood has played a pivotal role in elevating the notion of Islamization to its position as a fundamental tenet of the Islamist political program and as the religious imperative of Muslim societies. Yet the extent to which the Muslim Brotherhood has been a *producer* of the substantive change in the political culture of the Arab world—as opposed to having been a *product* of that change—is not readily discernible. Given the massive transformations of the ideological and political landscapes in the Arab world, the distinction is important. It will help in
determining the agency, and therefore the real power, of the Muslim Brotherhood, as well as in evaluating the prospects of its multitude offshoots.

The Contemporary Phenomenon of Islamism

The Muslim Brotherhood (Jamiyyat al-Ikhwan al-Muslimin) was founded by Hasan al-Banna in Egypt in 1928. Resisting the label of “political party,” it operated as a grass-roots political movement engaged in mass mobilization. The Brotherhood adopted a simple, yet comprehensive plan for the presumably gradual, bottom-up transformation of individuals, families, society, and the state along lines consistent with its understanding of the Muslim faith. While imbued with the ritualistic pietism of pre-Nahdah Muslim religious practice in Arabia, the Brotherhood advanced a plan that—in its thrust and endeavors to create a “New Man”—was more informed by the totalitarian projects of the twentieth century, whether nationalistic or socialistic, than by the traditional lived Islam of yesteryear.

The Muslim Brotherhood rise to prominence in Egypt caused it to clash with the populist “Arab socialist” attempt to reshape Egyptian polity and society, spearheaded by the charismatic leader Gamal Abd al-Nasser in the 1950s. A major byproduct of the ensuing persecution of the Muslim Brotherhood in its birthplace was the flight of many of its members, particularly to Saudi Arabia. There, through cross-fertilization with the native brand of Saudi Islamist ideology and with Islamist-inclined expatriates from other Arab states, these Egyptian Brothers laid the foundations for the amplification of the Brotherhood’s influence on Arab political culture. It is important to emphasize the complex character of this amplification: It was a serendipitous and opportunistic occurrence rather than the result of a deliberate plan; it was, however, almost unavoidable given the transformation that was affecting Arab political culture.

The ideological reformulation of Islamism that has, at the close of the twentieth century, elevated terrorism to the status of a religious obligation resulted primarily from the fusion of previously distinct Egyptian and Saudi Islamist concepts. Despite the underlying universal vision of the two formulations—each stated or implied that Islam was the ultimate truth and posited that all of God’s creation was its eventual realm—parochial concerns of their respective national domains remained the primary focus of both the native Egyptian Islamism of the Muslim Brotherhood and the native Saudi Islamism of the Wahhabi establishment until well into the 1970s. Starting in the 1980s, however, as events would demonstrate, the combined elements of Egyptian and Saudi Islamist localisms engendered a lethal globalist Islamist formulation that transcends nation-state boundaries, not only in principle, but also in its methods of recruitment, action and strategy.
In recent decades both Brotherhood activists, who want to emphasize the power and foresight of their movement, and students of the Islamist phenomena, who often see a Comintern parallel, have portrayed the Saudi incubation of modern Islamism in the 1960s as the implementation of a pre-conceived plan or path to a sharia state. Such a portrayal is at best an exaggeration. The actual lack of planning apparent in the later prominence of Islamism testifies to its ideological potency and to the depth of the transformation of Arab political culture, where competing ideologies and narratives had failed. Even if its role was inadvertent, however, the Muslim Brotherhood movement became the primary vector for the normalization, prominence, and later dominance of Islamism in Arab political culture.

Today the notion that Islam is a total system in which religion and politics are intertwined, the sacred and the profane merged, is almost universally accepted. Even those attempting to identify and promote a “moderate” Islam strive to locate hybrid forms in which the presumed fusion between religion and politics has not been completed or, alternatively, to encourage reforms that would help disengage politics from religion. While this understanding does indeed reflect the state of current affairs, it is important to recognize that the empirical reading does not confirm this state as representative of the Islamic historical and social record. It is, instead, a recent phenomenon that can be traced back to the nineteenth-century Nahdah movement, which itself saw modernity as a European import, and attempted to appropriate it for Arab or Muslim purposes.

Since the Nahdah, Islam, as a religious system, has undergone massive changes fueled by both intrinsic and extrinsic factors, ranging from the assimilation of the new, globally induced nation-state system to the unexpected wealth generated by oil revenues. The fusion of local Egyptian and Saudi forms of Islamism is itself the result of two intersecting trajectories in Arab political thought—a longer trajectory that approximates a virtual “Reformation” in Islam, and a shorter trajectory that expresses the failure of a second “Renaissance” in Arab culture.

The Roots of Islamism

The first trajectory is identified with the slow-paced evolution of an increasingly essentialistic tradition that emerged at the margins of the Islamic intellectual mainstream in the thought of Ahmad ibn Hanbal in the tenth century, through Ahmad ibn Taymiyyah in the fourteenth century, to Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab in the eighteenth century. It is a self-styled “traditionalism,” retrospectively referred to al nahj al salafi or al-salafiyyah (Salafism). Reactive in its early phase—Hanbal having resisted the Abbasids’ inquisition in defense of their official rationalist
mutazili doctrine—the burgeoning tradition found its most aggressive ideologue in Taymiyya and its political fulfillment in the alliance of Abd al-Wahhab with Muhammad ibn Saud in the late eighteenth century. Arabian tribal rivalries and Ottoman imperial necessities interrupted the new movement’s expansionary impetus and forced it into remission, but it preserved its fervor in its local expression.

The second trajectory starts in the nineteenth century with Muhammad Abduh, the famous Egyptian cleric based at al-Azhar University. The deliberately progressive thought of Abduh, who embraced a forward-oriented doctrine centered on the pristine purity of Islam, helped lay to rest the conventional Islamic view of history as descent. His work generated a succession of formulations that promoted individual and collective militancy as a means of achieving political change. These successive ideas displayed numerous departures from the liberalism intended and embedded in Abduh’s thought, however. Abduh’s disciple Muhammad Rashid Rida initiated the intellectual convergence of his mentor’s “reformist traditionalism” (al-salafiyyah al-islahiyyah) with the intransigent essentialism of Abd al-Wahhab’s scholastic traditionalism (al-salafiyyah al-ilmiyyah). And al-Banna, through the creation of the Muslim Brotherhood, worked to realize Abduh’s vision of the feasibility and necessity of progress—though it was a vision informed by Rida’s drastically restrictive definition of progress that he had reconciled with Abd al-Wahhab’s limiting interpretations.

By both introducing new ideological precepts and abdicating its custodianship of the Islamic textual corpus, the intellectual Muslim elite of the “liberal age,” which lasted from the Nahdah to the middle of the twentieth century, oversaw the simplification of the Islamic intellectual tradition. During this period, the restrictive layering that this tradition had superimposed on the religion’s fundamental texts was stripped away and the core issues contained therein left unaddressed. Of particular import was the neglect of the notion of “non-Divine rule” (hukm al-Taghut). The advocates of liberalism, nationalism and leftism in subsequent eras saw no need to focus on this issue either. They all relegated religiously derived thought to the status of an atavistic reflex that would soon be swept away by the organic reality of either progress or nation or class. And Islamism in general, and the Muslim Brotherhood in particular, benefited from this omission.

Each of the three grand non-Islamist narratives lost its prominence in conjunction with a momentous “failure” in modern Arab history. The liberal, post-WWI age—which was dominated by an understanding of state and society modeled loosely on the European nation-state system—ended with the loss of Palestine and the creation of the state of Israel in 1948. The era of nationalism, with its promises of liberation, unity, and social justice, was decisively deflated by Israel’s defeat of Arab armies in the June 1967 war. And leftist movements, which embraced revolutionary notions ranging from popular liberation warfare to the complete overhaul of the Arab
political order, and posited the Palestinian resistance as a role-model, were discredited by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

With these consecutive failures, the ideologizing of Islam, as undertaken by “Reformist Traditionalism” was thrust beyond the stated desires of the Muslim Brotherhood. The second trajectory continues with al-Banna engendering Said Qutb, an uncompromising ideologue who affixed the status of “pre-Islamic” on current Muslim states and societies, and Qutb engendering Abdallah Azzam, who put the implications of Qutb’s ideas into practice by withdrawing from society to pursue armed jihad. Osama bin Ladin, Ayman al-Zawahiri and al-Qaeda represent the ultimate intersection of the two trajectories in a lethal ideological militancy that, while building on the Muslim Brotherhood’s concept of Islamization, unequivocally rejects its means and framework.

In virtually every environment where a Brotherhood-inspired organization has taken root, it has produced a process of social, cultural, and ideological radicalization that has helped to incubate new efforts to fuse religion and politics into the “total system” the Brotherhood envisions. Often times, these new efforts may reject the methodic transformation espoused by the Brotherhood. The more radical Islamists’ schematic reading of the complex Muslim heritage to demonstrate its compatibility with their goal of restoring the original community’s supposedly comprehensive belief system is, moreover, often turned against the Muslim Brotherhood itself. Through the radicals’ uncompromising filter, the Brotherhood is usually judged to be wanting in purity in its religion, society and thought. This often hampers our ability to evaluate the Brotherhood’s role, as its form of Islamism is often a transitional Islamism on the way toward further radicalism. The interplay between its role as an agent of change—as opposed to its role as a symptom of change—can only be assessed as a function of local considerations.

Before the late 1960s, when the Palestinian resistance movement rose to prominence as the center of revolutionary activity, the main vectors of political thought propagated in the Arab world originated in Cairo. Egypt’s well-developed higher education system insured consistent Egyptian soft power in the Arab world. It not only produced legions of Egyptian teachers and other professionals who were needed in and dispatched to other Arabic-speaking countries, but it also attracted the Arab youth of such countries who wanted to acquire university degrees. While this phenomenon long benefited the advocates of Arab nationalism, statist socialism, and the notion that Egypt was the Arab world’s center of gravity, it eventually gave the Muslim Brotherhood an even more lasting advantage by providing the structure through which the movement spread to societies across North Africa and Southwest Asia. Much of this spread was produced by a “pull” factor, in which non-Egyptians imported the Brotherhood’s ideals into their own societies, rather than by the “push” of emissaries exporting those ideals.
The Muslim Brotherhood organization in Syria traces its history back to the 1930s, for instance, when returning Syrian graduates of the Egyptian university system created the loosely structured Shabab Muhammad (Mohammed Youth) organization. While openly inspired by al-Banna’s call for the creation of an Islamic order, Shabab Muhammad was also affected by changes in urban youth activism in the Levant after the establishment of the post-WWI nation-state system. During this period numerous groups influential in the old urban social order—notably the Sufi brotherhoods, the guilds, and the remnants of the ahdath youth associations—lost much of their relevance. New groups, particularly political parties, competed to fill the void. And even after being formally transformed into a distinct political entity in the 1950s, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood was unable to oppose effectively the then-greater appeal of both pan-Arab and pan-Syrian nationalist visions.

These nationalist parties came to be increasingly dominated by a newly urbanized population, however, which was largely made up of religious minorities who provided the state with soldiers, bureaucrats, and other civil functionaries. This development contributed to the alienation of the Sunni lower classes in Damascus and other Syrian cities. And the long-established Sunni urban elite suffered as well, its influence severely weakened by a succession of political coups and the failure of the union with Egypt between 1958 and 1961.

The Arab Baath Socialist Party, which has governed the country since 1963, is deeply disliked by the majority of Syrian Sunnis. Founded by Michel Aflaq, a Christian, with a theoretically secular ideology—which characterizes Islam as a mere product of Arab civilization, albeit a historically important one—this party soon degenerated in the Sunni consciousness into a vehicle for sectarian Alawi dominance. While the Alawi community constitutes only a tenth of the total Syrian population, its members have overwhelming hegemony within the Baath Party. With the realm of discourse available for the opposition so restricted, the Muslim Brotherhood has become the principal voice of dissent. This has been Syria’s state of affairs for more than four decades, with consecutive ebbs and flows of opposition activity.

In the mid-1960s the Muslim Brotherhood participated in massive civil action across Syria, to which the military responded with considerable force. The grip of the Baath party, and hence the new Alawi elite, on the military has survived despite such acts of repression, coups (1970), and battlefield defeats (1967 and 1973). While these circumstances may support the argument that the radicalization of the Brotherhood’s thought and action was essentially reactive, it should be remembered that such thought and action conformed to the movement’s social, cultural and religious agenda and its own ideology of bottom-up Islamization. The debates over the use of force in resisting the regime, moreover, also reflected the ideas and practices of numerous offshoots of the Brotherhood’s loose international network.
As the Baathist regime’s pro-nationalist and pro-leftist rhetoric became increasingly discredited, the Muslim Brotherhood’s Islamization project asserted more influence over Syrian culture—though this influence took different forms. The Sururiyyah movement of the 1960s adopted the Brotherhood concept of Islamization while qualifying its political aspect; the 1980s witnessed the radical reinterpretation of the Quran into a blueprint for social change and justice. But throughout, the effect of the Muslim Brotherhood was to confirm Islam as the axis of political and social reflection.

In 1973 Hafez al-Assad, who had seized power in the 1970 military coup, had to back down in the face of widespread protests from supporting a proposed constitution that did not require the president of Syria to be a Muslim. This retreat was accompanied by Assad’s ambiguous conversion to Sunni Islam, which thus preserved constitutional decorum. It also hastened the religious transformation of the Alawi community into mainstream Shiism under the auspices of the Iranian-Lebanese religious leader Imam Musa al-Sadr.

Muslim Brotherhood hawks saw this concession as proof of the vulnerability of the regime. With a considerable fraction of the regime’s military occupied with its incursion into Lebanon (1976), these hawks succeeded in initiating an underground insurgency that targeted government personnel and institutions. Many of their actions focused on symbols of the socioeconomic changes that had affected Syria, and class grievances, atavistic sectarianism and urban-rural divisions fueled the confrontation—which was launched prior to the rise of jihadism. Still, the role of Islamist mobilization was central. (Later Syrian jihadists, however, in particular Abu Musab al-Suri, one of the most prominent ideologues of Global Jihad, would reflect on the lack of intellectual clarity and preparedness in the Muslim Brotherhood actions of the 1970s and ‘80s.8)

Ostensibly led by the hawks of the Muslim Brotherhood, the insurgency was, in fact, complex in its character and players. Many Syrian local groups, as well as regional forces, participated in instigating and/or executing attacks against regime positions, while some in the Brotherhood’s old guard tried to keep their distance from any brutal actions. Atrocities were committed by both the insurgents and the regime. In June 1979 insurgents attacked the University of Aleppo, killing scores of students and one university professor. The regime responded by executing prisoners believed to be members of the Brotherhood.

The confrontation escalated in March 1980 into uprisings in virtually all Syrian cities, with the open participation of numerous opposition groups. Though the Assad regime responded decisively over the next two years with spectacular acts of brutality and collective punishment, the Muslim Brotherhood remained an existential threat to the regime until February 1982, when it took over the city of Hama.

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This prompted Assad to dispatch his brother Rifat at the helm of “defense brigades” to squash the rebellion. Rifat accomplished his mission by steadily bombarding the city and killing an estimated 20,000 of its inhabitants.9

This was the knock-out punch for the insurgency, as well as for the hawkish members of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. From 1982 until his death in 2000, Assad’s dictatorial rule was uncontested. His occupation of Lebanon, moreover, made it possible for him to prevent the Muslim Brotherhood from organizing in the midst of Lebanese Islamists, many of whom Assad consecutively persecuted, fragmented, and then nurtured.

Forced into exile in 1982, the leadership of the Syrian Brotherhood advanced progressively more democratic principles in their public discourse over the following two decades. Brotherhood members in Syria, meanwhile, were subjected to a revolving door of incarceration and severely restricted release. As a result, this period produced an extensive “prison literature” (adab alsujun) that provided glimpses into the horrific conditions endured by the multitude of prisoners often forgotten in the Syrian gulag.

The hopes that preceded the accession to power of Hafez al-Assad’s son Bashar in 2000 were short-lived. Dissent in Syria has remained a costly proposition, with even the mildest call for reform yielding years in prison. Over decades of dictatorial rule, the regime has honed its ability to control society and quash dissent. No local opposition has been able to organize. The Assad regime has appeared to be completely invulnerable—at least until the symbolic defeat Bashar and his security apparatus suffered in March 2005, when the “Cedar Revolution” forced the Syrian military to end its open occupation of Lebanon.

Perceived as the sole approximation of an institutionalized opposition, the Muslim Brotherhood is the focal point of the hopes of many, including democrats, for positive change in Syria. Its leadership has asserted that it aspires to a “civil democratic” polity rather than an Islamic state.10 But in Syrian intellectual circles, both in exile and underground, debate continues as to whether this position signifies a real evolution and re-conceptualization of Islamization—along lines similar to Turkish Islamism—or whether it is merely a temporary tactical posture.

Of greater import, however, is the dramatic divergence between the Muslim Brotherhood’s leadership-in-exile and its rank and file in Assad’s Syria. With their leaders far away, the loosely organized Brotherhood networks in Syria have lost much of the movement’s unifying vision. Some members have succumbed to Salafi and jihadi recruitment efforts, occasionally with the tacit approval of the regime. And there is no indication that the Syrian Brotherhood’s rank and file—which responded to the call of the Brotherhood hawks in the 1970s and ’80s—will be receptive to the political evolution of its nominal leadership abroad.
Building on its experience with Lebanese Islamism, furthermore, the Syrian regime has become adept at managing hostile Islamist groups on its territory. It allows them to pursue “checked and balanced” operations in ways consistent with regime interests. The government has been selective, for example, in trying to disrupt the Islamist militants’ supply lines to Iraq since 2004, using its efforts as a bargaining chip in its intercourse with the United States. Similarly, the regime has provided recruits of the radical group Fath al-Islam with implicit safe passage in their journey to northern Lebanon, where their agitation has caused severe problems for Lebanon’s anti-Syrian government.

The extent to which the popular base of the Muslim Brotherhood has been penetrated by the regime, as well as by Salafi and jihadi groups, is not quantifiable, but it is believed to be substantial. And the Brotherhood certainly has contributed to preparing fertile ground for radical Islamism in Syria—whether it is now truly moderating or simply employing a tactical maneuver. It is not, however, entirely responsible for this state of affairs. The proponents of nationalist, leftist and liberal alternatives bear equal blame for failing to establish any system capable of resolving the tensions of class and community. With important local variations, the pattern in Lebanon is similar.

Lebanon

The local incarnation of the Muslim Brotherhood in Lebanon, Jamaah Islamiyah, traces its roots to the Jamiiyyat Ibad al-Rahman (Association of the Servants of the Merciful). This social, cultural, and religious charitable organization was founded in 1948 by Muhammad Umar al-Dauk to help educate the Lebanese Muslim community, which Dauk deemed to have strayed from its religious values. Many of the main figures of Jamaah Islamiyah “graduated” from Jamiiyyat Ibad al-Rahman, which is still active as an apolitical institution. Dauk’s impulse in establishing his organization was similar to al-Banna’s, but his call for a return to pietism was distinctly milder than al-Banna’s call for Islamization and made no reference to jihad or martyrdom. Years later Jamaah Islamiyah activists would contend that Dauk’s limited mission reflected his assessment that Lebanese Muslim society was not then ready to accept Islamization.11

Indeed, despite making considerable inroads over the last decades, Islamization as a project and Islamism as an ideology have remained at the margins of the Lebanese Muslim sociocultural mainstream. This resistance arises less from the much-touted pluralism and cosmopolitanism of Lebanese society—which are still factors—than from the surviving pattern of traditional dynastic paternalism that is
the primary mode of leadership in all Lebanese communities. Because it is weak by design, the Lebanese state has failed to replace this dynastic paternalism with a statist paternalism that would encroach into the social and economic realms of the community and thereby invite such corrective ideologies as Islamization.

Jamaah Islamiyah was formalized in 1964 as an official political party. Its first and long-time leader was Fathi Yakan, a medical doctor from the northern, predominantly Sunni city of Tripoli. Though limited in its size and impact outside of Tripoli, it was geographically widespread. It also sought—with limited but not insignificant success—to assert its presence by nominating its members, many of whom were professionals, for leadership positions in professional associations. Within the social context that characterizes much of the Levant, Jamaah Islamiyah was naturally Sunni, distinctly urban, and predominantly middle class. It was, therefore, unable to compete either with the dominant dynastic political families at the helm of the various urban communities or with their populist nationalist and leftist rivals who claimed to speak for the masses.

In 1972 Jamaah Islamiyah attempted to expand its base and mission by creating a political action group focused on Muslim demands. This effort was overshadowed, however, by the polarization that Lebanon underwent over the presence of the Palestinian resistance movement on its soil. Many in the Muslim lower classes tended, with others, to support their presence, while segments of the Muslim urban middle class joined others in a muted rejection. Even with the Lebanese civil war, activist Islamism remained on the margins of political life.

In the early 1980s, however, the incubating function of Jamaah Islamiyah manifested itself in the creation in northern Lebanon of Harakat al-Tawhid (the Unitarism Movement) by Said Shaban. Shaban had left Jamaah and adopted the methods and structures of other Lebanese political parties: populist discourse, patronage systems, and active militias. Using the abundant financial resources provided by Yasser Arafat, chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization, Shaban crushed rival nationalist and leftist militias and established an actual fiefdom in Tripoli, eventually referred to as Imarat al-Tawhid (the Tawhid Emirate). Here he was able to impose on large portions of the city and its surrounding territory an increasingly ruthless version of Islamization. In his emirate Shaban created a base for ecumenical Islamism, inviting and interacting with groups and individuals espousing doctrines that ranged from Shi’a Khomeinism to strict Wahhabi Salafism. It was under the auspices of Harakat al-Tawhid that Dai al-Islam al-Shahhal, the pivotal figure in creating a Salafi movement in Lebanon, established his missionary association targeting the Sunni rural and urban lower classes.

In 1983 the Syrian army entered Tripoli and brutally repressed Shaban’s movement, chasing out of Lebanon his ally Arafat and his PLO fighters, who had taken
refuge in Tripoli after a devastating confrontation with the Israeli military. This action ended the emirate’s despotic and arbitrary rule of Tripoli society and replaced it with collective punishment dispensed by the heavy hand of the Syrian security apparatus. The Syrian military did not, however, seek to eradicate Tripoli’s Islamist groups. It initiated instead a process of enticement and intimidation through which these Islamists were gradually assimilated and/or placed into the Syrian security system imposed on Lebanon. Most of the Islamists eventually joined the matrix of Syria’s allies, through which “participation” in the Lebanese political system was bestowed, tolerated, or withheld on the basis of loyalty or utility.

By the mid-1980s the Syrian regime had successfully engaged and defeated two Islamist movements—the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and the Lebanese Harakat al-Tawhid. Both these operations, however, were reactive. The regime subsequently introduced a more proactive plan both to neutralize and to exploit Islamist sentiments. The plan employed three approaches: It consolidated the regime’s alliances and arrangements with preexisting Islamist groups by nurturing their dependence; it created new, more docile Islamist organizations with slightly altered ideological outlooks to counterbalance the preexisting ones; and it allowed the independent but controlled growth of hostile organizations that could potentially be activated by the selective lifting of restrictions. During its occupation of Lebanon, the Syrian regime productively used all three approaches with the Lebanese Sunni community.

The Syrian managers of the Lebanese dossier established solid links with the leadership of Jamaah Islamiyah, notably Fathi Yakan, and were able to penetrate and shape its political stands. In exchange Jamaah Islamiyah was able to secure three seats in the 1992 Lebanese Parliament. This Syrian connection created tensions within the organization, however, and ultimately led to a mutiny and to the withdrawal of Fathi Yakan, who went on to create the pro-Syrian Jabhat al-Amal al-Islami (Islamic Action Front).

Simultaneously, Syria gave considerable support to the followers of the Beirut-based Ethiopian Sufi mystic and religious scholar Abdallah al-Harari. This group used Syrian aid to help take over Jamiiyat al-Mashari al-Khayriyyah al-Islamiyah (Association of Islamic Charitable Projects), expand it and actively compete with Jamaah Islamiyah across Sunni Lebanon. Presenting themselves as a “moderate” response to the essentialism of the Muslim Brotherhood but demonstrating little of the “tolerance” they profess, Harari’s followers—commonly known as al-Ahbash—have developed an international missionary network that has internalized the Brotherhood’s Islamization concept, adopted and centralized its structures and methods, but elaborated an ideology based on virulent polemical attacks against Brotherhood, Salafi, and Sunni elites. In theory the Ahbash represent the syncretism of traditional pietism and political populism, but in form and practice they are the
mirror image of their main rivals. The Ahbash provided Lebanon’s Syrian overseers with a reliable ally in keeping other Sunni political forces in check. The rivalry between the Ahbash and Jamaah degenerated into mutual assassination plots.

While actively involved with these rivals, the ubiquitous Syrian security apparatus restricted its dealings with Salafi and jihadi groups to surveillance. It allowed them to gain a foothold in Palestinian refugee camps, in the disenfranchised belt of urban misery surrounding Tripoli, and in the Dinniyiyh highlands nearby. This hands-off approach—in conjunction with Islamization-induced radicalization—culminated in the confrontation in the spring and summer of 2007 between the Lebanese armed forces and the Fath al-Islam organization in the Nahr al-Barid Palestinian refugee camp.

It was self-evident that the degeneration of Lebanese Islamist politics under Syrian tutelage had left ample room for a new force to capitalize on the dissatisfaction of potential Islamist constituencies. Generic Islamism had become the default ideological identity of both Lebanese and Palestinian segments of Lebanon’s Sunni population left behind in the plans of the Second Republic, which had been established in 1990. That year Lebanon officially concluded its fifteen-year civil war by overhauling its political system and promising an even development strategy. The Second Republic, godfathered and overseen by Syria’s Hafez al-Assad, consisted of two de facto states—an unofficial one allocated to Hezbollah, and an official one in which Syria tried to manage, control, and benefit from the Lebanese-Saudi businessman-cum-politician Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri. The latter state focused largely on urban areas, and though Hariri strove to bridge the rural-urban gap through direct patronage, his influence in the Palestinian camps was curtailed by both Lebanese and Syrian considerations.

The impact of Hariri on the evolution of Lebanon and its Sunni community is yet to be assessed. With regard to the growth of Islamism, his record is mixed. As Syria’s foremost nominal ally but actual rival, Hariri lent support to Jamaah Islamiyah, providing a financial counterweight to Syrian influence that contributed to the schism Jamaah underwent in 2000. He also targeted rival political families, ultimately replacing their political patronage and paternalism with his own—despite his professed embrace of a progressive agenda. The established dynastic paternalism, however, had served the country quite well. Its system of allegiance and patronage helped the Lebanese resist the allure of imported Islamist, Salafi, and jihadi ideologies. By weakening other political families, and occasionally seeking to influence and assimilate Islamists, Hariri may have inadvertently set the stage for unwanted developments that could be checked only by his own charisma. It is not clear that, following Hariri’s assassination in 2005, his improvised dynasty will be able to perform the same function.
Conclusion

In both Syria and Lebanon, the Muslim Brotherhood provided politically marginalized socioeconomic groups with a vehicle for expressing opposition to the state. In both countries, however, the Brotherhood organizations were reactive and unable to articulate a productive political program. The despotic nature of the Syrian regime, and its successful eradication of any opposition, has preserved the status of the Brotherhood as the only credible counter-force to the government. But its actual strength is unknown. In Lebanon the Brotherhood organization never succeeded in breaking out of the margins of political life. Today it belongs, as a junior partner, to a broad coalition of anti-Syrian forces under the dynastic paternalistic Sunni leadership of Saad Hariri, son of the deceased prime minister.

In both Syria and Lebanon, however, the Muslim Brotherhood’s Islamization project has affected political culture and paved the way for the emergence of more radical forces. In Syria these forces are now checked and/or controlled by a ruthless regime, and their strength will only be revealed when the regime eventually falls. And in Lebanon traditional patterns continue to dominate the practice of politics. In both locales, however, Islamization has attracted many devoted disciples in the absence of compelling alternatives, and this project may well produce a number of unintended unpleasant consequences.

A review of the Muslim Brotherhood’s evolution in Syria and Lebanon reveals both its direct and indirect responsibility for the emergence of radical groups and sentiments in those societies, but gives no indication that the Brotherhood is likely to play a “moderating” role in either. Some argue that the Brotherhood’s bottom-up approach to Islamization, by focusing on the agency of the individual and society, works to prepare the way for democratic practice in an environment where top-down Islamization is the norm. This argument, however, ignores the fact that—with the possible exception of Saudi Arabia—it is the Brotherhood’s notion of Islamization that has generated and empowered more radical versions throughout the Muslim world. The evidence clearly suggests that the Muslim Brotherhood tends to promote, rather than to dilute, radicalism.
NOTES

1. A relative neologism, even in the literature of the Muslim Brotherhood movement, the concept of \textit{aslamah} (Islamization) has been variably used in reference to the three-stage strategy of Hasan al-Banna—\textit{tarif} (education), \textit{takwin} (formation) and \textit{tanfidh} (implementation)—but also, pejoratively, to forced conversion. The National Honor Covenant, issued by the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood in May 2001, reflects in its use of the term the efforts of Islamist scholars to produce an ontological reform of science and knowledge in conformity with Islam. For a secularist critical reading of this Covenant and its use of Islamization, see Uday Abu Jamal, “A Reading in the Civilizational Project of the Muslim Brotherhood,” in \textit{al-Hiwar al-Mutamaddin}, 1244 (30 June 2005), http://www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=40273.

2. The debate between proponents of these two approaches is largely asymmetrical, and is dominated by radical critics of the Muslim Brotherhood. An example of a textual critique of the positions of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood is provided by Abd al-Munim Mustafa Halimah (Abu Basir al-Tartusi), a prominent radical Islamist ideologue, at http://altartosi.com/refutation/refut032.html.


4. In his \textit{Neopatriarchy: A Theory of Distorted Change in Arab Society} (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), Hisham Sharabi explores aspects of the sociopolitical dimension of this continuity. However, the dissociation from the normative reading remains unfulfilled.


7. A Muslim Brotherhood offshoot, founded by Muhammad Surur Zayn al-Din and influenced by Said Qutb’s assessment of current Muslim society as pre-Islamic, focused on strict sociocultural reform and a deference of political action. See the special issue on al-Sururiyyah in \textit{Kitab al-Misbar al-Shahri} (February 2007).


9. The definitive detailed account of the events, from a Muslim Brotherhood perspective, is provided in \textit{Hamah, Masat al Asr} (Cairo; Dar al-Itisam, 1985).

11. For Jamaah Islamiyah’s own account of its history, see http://al-jamaa.org/top_intro.asp.

12. For Harakat al-Tawhid’s own account of this period (with the glaring omission of the role of the Syrian regime in obliterating the Imarat), see http://www.attawhed.org/Page.aspx?ID=1.

13. The Association maintains numerous websites; in particular, see http://www.aicp.org/.