

The Brotherhood in the Salafist Universe

by Gilles Kepel

NINETEEN-SEVENTY-ONE WAS A WATERSHED YEAR IN THE HISTORY of the Muslim Brotherhood and the Islamist movement at large. The Egyptian ruler Gamal Abdel Nasser had died the year before, and his successor, Anwar Sadat, adopted an altogether more conciliatory approach toward the Muslim Brotherhood. This effectively brought the era of the Nasserist repression of the Islamist movement in the 1950s and '60s to a formal close. Although the Brotherhood had been almost entirely destroyed during Nasser's reign, the era produced several important outcomes that helped to shape the Brotherhood's rebound and the future development of the Islamist movement as a whole.

First of all, Nasser's brutal policies helped to elevate those Brotherhood leaders whom Nasser had imprisoned and hanged to the status of Muslim martyrs. These Brothers became widely revered as the first martyrs of the post-colonial Muslim world, and after 1971, this helped to improve the Brotherhood movement's political prospects as a whole. Said Qutb, who is still often referred to as "the martyr Said Qutb," is especially significant in this regard. His martyrdom automatically conferred upon him enormous respect, and this in turn helped the Brotherhood tremendously in their efforts to reach out to ordinary Muslims and to build political legitimacy.

Nasser's authoritarian policies also helped to de-legitimize the secular Arab regimes that had been formed after the end of the colonial period. The fact that many of the Brothers were sent to prison or concentration camps and then executed came to be seen widely as a metaphor: Arab society was imprisoned by secular Arab rulers, who were betraying all the popular ideals of post-colonial independence.

Qutb, for example, was incarcerated in Nasser's prisons until 1965 and then, after a brief reprieve, jailed yet again and hanged in 1966. This sort of betrayal of a Muslim martyr lent new credibility to the Brotherhood's claims that secular Arab regimes did not deserve popular support.

Another important outcome of the Nasserite era was that it sent many Egyptian Brothers into exile. The Egyptians fled to a number of countries—Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and others on the Arabian Peninsula; Pakistan and Afghanistan in Southwest Asia; and countries in North Africa and Europe. This Brotherhood Diaspora facilitated not only the spread of the movement's ideology, but also the establishment of its very strong international networks. In addition to *dawa* or missionary networks, the Brothers built financial, educational and university networks as well. In this way, the era of Nasserite repression actually fostered the growth of the Brotherhood's "world web."

And yet, despite these improvements in the Brotherhood's overall political prospects after Nasser, the Brotherhood also had new challengers to contend with after 1971—including Islamists themselves. From its founding in the late 1920s to the early days of Nasser's regime, the Muslim Brotherhood was the single most prominent Islamist organization. With virtually no organized competition or alternatives, the Brotherhood was seen as the quintessential point of reference among Islamist sympathizers. But as the Brotherhood was being crushed in Egypt, it came under increasing criticism from within its own ranks and from Islamists outside, and was held accountable for its failures. Why had the Brotherhood been unable to resist Nasser's oppression when they were such a strong mass movement in the early 1950s? What kind of mistakes had they made? Wasn't it time for the Islamist movement to find and adopt a new course in order to overcome its shortcomings?

These questions created deep disputes and, ultimately, a schism within the Brotherhood movement itself that came increasingly to the fore after 1971. On the one hand were those who supported the more radical ideas of Said Qutb, and on the other, those who supported the more traditional, politically-oriented views of Hasan Hudaybi, the Brotherhood's Supreme Guide in the 1960s. That ideological schism, combined with the general autonomy that the Brotherhood's international branches gained after its central leadership in Egypt was crushed by Nasser, created even more rifts within the Islamist movement, and led to the formation of a diverse new range of organizations.

Today, the Brotherhood itself can no longer be considered the single, unified entity that it once had been before Nasser's repression. The divergent roles of the Brotherhood's branches in Egypt, Syria, Palestine, and a number of other countries attest to this fact. Several Islamic political movements—the AKP (Justice and Development Party) in Turkey, the Justice and Development Party in Morocco, the Algerian Hamas

movement, among others— are ideologically and politically indebted to the Brotherhood, though they don't necessarily claim the lineage and can not be considered "true green" Brothers. Similarly, the jihadist wing of the Salafist movement, which is today led by al-Qaeda, is clearly an ideological offspring of the Brotherhood, though they have emphatically repudiated their connections to their parent body. To understand this diversification within the Brotherhood and the Islamic movement as a whole, it is important to understand the new political realities and dynamics that emerged in post-Nasserist Arab societies after 1971.

The Islamist Revival

IT IS IMPORTANT TO REMEMBER THAT EGYPT IN THE EARLY 1970S WAS STILL IN a state of shock from its devastating defeat in the Six Day War of 1967. Among Islamists, it was commonly felt that this humiliation was a punishment visited on Egypt by God for its persecution of Islam and martyrs like Said Qutb. More broadly, reality had put the nationalist and socialist ideas that had held sway in Nasser's era on trial, and those secular ideals had been judged wanting. This produced a sort of ideological vacuum in Egypt that the Brotherhood felt assured that it could fill.

An additional boon to the Brotherhood came from the sweeping policy reforms implemented by Nasser's successor, Anwar Sadat. In 1971, Sadat launched his "rectification revolution"—which is, of course, an oxymoron. At the time, Sadat was intent on weakening Nasser's pro-Soviet entourage so that he could disentangle Egypt from its existing alliances in the Middle East, curry favor with the United States, and seek rapprochement between Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Sadat saw the anti-communist Brotherhood as a potential conservative ally in these efforts, and he sought to win their support.

Sadat freed most of the Brothers from prison, and many of them soon wound up on university campuses, where the government granted them relative freedom to organize and propagate their message, as Sadat needed conservative allies to help him break the bones of the left in the academy. Sadat also sent for Omar al-Telmesani, a lawyer who was then the Brothers' Supreme Guide, and offered to give him a license to publish the Brotherhood's long-suppressed monthly bulletin, *Call to Islam*. The Egyptian Mukhabarat, or intelligence organization, also subsequently befriended the Brotherhood, and in addition to receiving support from the state apparatus, they were freed to mobilize new funding channels in the Gulf.

Taken together, these activities helped bring about the spirit of religious conservatism that characterized Egypt in the first half of the 1970s. This popular embrace of Islamic sentiment and sensibilities in the wake of Nasserism's collapse was in fact

due to many factors and dynamics, although the Brotherhood played an important role in spearheading and shaping the tenor of the revival. On university campuses, for instance, the Brotherhood not only opposed the leftists, but also advocated, among other things, for the inclusion of prayers during classes, the wearing of veils by female students, and the segregation of classes by sex.

In this, the Brotherhood's new lease on life unleashed far more than Egypt's new rulers had originally intended. Despite this, Sadat's regime persisted in the belief that it could ultimately outsmart, manipulate and co-opt the Brothers to serve its own, very different interests. That view rubbed off on other regimes as well, and in the early 1970s, pro-Western regimes in the Middle East showed little hostility toward the Muslim Brotherhood. This favorable disposition toward the Brotherhood developed even more strongly in the 1980s, when Gulf countries and the CIA provided the financial fuel for the jihad in Afghanistan. That effort was ideologically led, devised, heralded and championed by Abdullah Azzam, a Palestinian from Jenin who became one of the most important exponents of the Muslim Brotherhood's ideology in the late twentieth century, as well as the intellectual father of the contemporary jihadist movement.

The Brotherhood's Standing in Saudi Arabia

AFTER BEING DRIVEN OUT OF EGYPT IN THE 1950S AND '60S, MANY BROTHERS found shelter in Saudi Arabia. The Saud family establishment was extremely hesitant and cautious vis-à-vis the Brotherhood, and they were never permitted access to the core of Saudi society, and to deal openly with religious issues. This was seen as the exclusive domain of the Wahhabis, who had formed an alliance with the ruling family.

But the Saudi elites nonetheless saw the Brothers as useful because—to put it bluntly—they could read and write. While the Wahhabi ulama were ill at ease in dealing with the modern world, the Brothers were well traveled and relatively sophisticated. They knew foreign languages and, unlike the Wahhabi ulama, were aware that the earth was not flat. The Brothers had been in jail, had political experience, and were skilled in modern polemics that resonated widely with ordinary people. Most of all, they had stood courageously against Saudi Arabia's archenemies, the communists and secularists, and were eager to continue the fight. At the behest of the World Muslim League—which Saudi Arabia created in 1962 to counter Nasser's attempts to internationalize Al Azhar University and promote the view that Islam was compatible with socialism—the Brothers argued in a variety of public forums that communism and socialism were totally antithetical to Islam.

As in Egypt, the Brothers became especially active in the field of education, which was considered by Saudi and Gulf rulers to be innocuous at the time. Like many political leaders, the Arabian rulers looked down their noses at academics because they didn't deal with serious people, only with students. But as we know, those students eventually grow up, and some come to power. This is exactly what happened in Saudi Arabia. Most notoriously, the exiled Egyptian Muhammad Qutb, Said Qutb's brother, was a prominent member of the faculty at the University of Medina and also at King Abdulaziz University in Jeddah. He was the supervisor of Safar al-Hawali, who would later emerge as a key leader of the *Sahwa*, or "Awakening," shaykhs, a religious movement known for its open support of rebellion against the Saudi monarchy and support of al-Qaeda.

More broadly speaking, a cross-fertilization of ideas took place between the exiled Brotherhood and the austere teachings of what might be described as the Wahhabi rank and file. That interaction, combined with the new organizational and financial backing of groups like the Muslim World League, would eventually lead to the rise of a new, internationalist form of Salafism. The Brotherhood played a crucial role in shaping this new ideological universe, which is now, in important ways, the dominant cultural force in the Arab Middle East.

The Influence of Said Qutb

IN THIS NEW, POST-NASSER SALAFIST UNIVERSE, BROTHERHOOD THINKERS LIKE Said Qutb became—and remain to this day—extremely important influences, whereas men like Hasan Hidaybi have been nearly completely forgotten. Hidaybi's legacy may perhaps still be seen in some of the more pragmatic aspects and trends of the Brotherhood's political organization, but today, his writings are seldom read and no one cares about them.

In the early 1970s, the Brotherhood's establishment in Egypt by and large responded warmly to Sadat's conciliatory policies and efforts to court them. These Brothers were pursuing a reformist agenda, hoping that access to the regime would allow them to manipulate it from the inside and eventually cause it to fall. But the memory of Nasser's repression was still strong in the minds of many, and many Brothers saw political participation as a foolish strategy that Sadat would ultimately win. These Brothers looked to Qutb for an alternate vision.

Said Qutb was executed before he was able to explain his ideas fully, and because of this, his writings remain open to considerable interpretation. His main contribution was to insist that the contemporary world could rightly be declared *jahilliya*—that is, synonymous with the pre-Islamic world of ignorance in Arabia that was

destroyed by the Prophet Muhammad. Qutb claimed that modern *jahillya* society must also be destroyed so that true Islam could once again be built on its ruins.

Qutb's teachings inspired many of the Islamist groups that emerged in Egypt and elsewhere in the Muslim world in the 1970s, and especially those whose leaders came up through the universities. Among those groups was the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, which was responsible for the assassination of Sadat in 1981. One of the key figures in that group was, of course, Ayman al-Zawahiri, although he did not actually favor Sadat's assassination at the time.

Zawahiri is the Egyptian-born scion of very prominent aristocratic families on both his maternal and paternal sides. On his mother's side, his great uncle was the founder of the Arab League, and members of the family had married into Saudi royalty. On his father's side, several relatives were prominent academics, and a great-uncle had held one of the leading chairs at Al Azhar University. From an early age, Zawahiri himself was very much taken with Qutb's ideas, and one of his uncles was actually Qutb's lawyer. Zawahiri and his young associates believed that Qutb's ideas had to be developed into a worldview—one that would have nothing to do with the Brothers' political activities and purported compromises with the *jahillya* state. After Sadat was assassinated, they spent time in jail, but once freed, they fled to Saudi Arabia where they caught connecting flights to Peshawar.

The Afghan Crucible

IN AFGHANISTAN ALL THE DIFFERENT FACTIONS WITHIN THE ISLAMIST MOVEMENT, which had been smashed open by Nasser's repression and unable to reconcile under Sadat, found common ground under the banner of armed jihad. The ultimate success of the jihad in Afghanistan dealt serious blows not only to the communist world, but also helped to silence Ayatollah Khomeini's claim to hegemony in the Muslim world after the Iranian Islamic revolution of 1979.

By the end of the 1980s, therefore, the Brothers and other Islamist radicals who were in Afghanistan were convinced that the sky was the limit. The Brothers had invested heavily in Afghanistan—sending university students, doctors from their medical associations, money, weapons—and they cherished their part in the victory. The Soviet Union had been defeated and its empire destroyed. As some saw it, it was now even possible to turn against the other enemy: the United States.

But the old questions remained: how should one proceed? Should the success and impetus of the Afghan jihad be used to bring more pressure to bear on the regimes at home from within? Or, in the spirit of Qutb's vision of struggling against *jahillya*, should an effort be made to duplicate the Afghan model and develop guerrilla cells

in Egypt, Algeria, Bosnia, Chechnya, and wherever else there was an opportunity to topple a regime in the name of Islam?

These were open questions at the time, and remain very much so to this day. On the one hand, the radicals insisted that the Brothers had sold out, and that there was no reason to have anything to do with them. Zawahiri, for instance, wrote a long book in the early 1990s entitled *Al-Hasad Al Mur Muslimin (The Bitter Harvest)*, that very strongly criticized the Muslim Brotherhood's participation in politics. This strategy, Zawahiri argued, had led nowhere for sixty years, and it was pointless for the Islamic movement to continue along this path.

Just as the Brotherhood was rejected by the more radical Islamists, they were not embraced by secular Arab rulers and the West as they had been in the past. Whereas during the Cold War the Brothers tried to extend their hands to the Arab regimes and present themselves as the bulwark against both leftists and radicals, a new game had started. The Soviet Union had disappeared, as had Communism and the leftist threat. In the 1990s, the question in the West became how to deal with the Brothers: should they be enlisted to help Arab regimes, as well as the United States and Europe, to contend with the Islamist radicals? Or, on the contrary, should they be perceived as part and parcel of the threat? What, exactly, is the place of the Brotherhood in the Salafist universe that emerged since 1971?

The MB Today and the Lessons of Palestine

HOW, THEN, DOES THE MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD NOW FUNCTION IN TERMS OF VIOLENCE, politics, and the like? To what extent is it different from more radical groups, and to what extent is it similar? Hamas provides an interesting example. Because of the weakness of the Brotherhood in the wake of Nasser's persecution, most of the local factions gained autonomy. Hamas, for example, while technically the Brotherhood's Palestinian branch, makes its own decisions. Hamas has gained such preeminence within the Islamist world that it no longer needs to take orders from the Egyptians, though it may accept the Egyptian Brothers' financial help.

The Hamas leaders Ismail Haniyeh and Mahmoud Zahar have recently made it clear that their movement in Gaza focuses first and foremost on national Palestinian issues. Despite paying lip service to the problem of Muslim persecution everywhere, Hamas is not at all interested in the global issues of the Muslim Umma that dominate al-Qaeda's ideology.

The strong national agenda of the Brotherhood's Palestinian branch led the organization to clash with the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), and the two sides struggled to gain hegemony over the Palestinian political field. But before the first

Intifada of 1987, the Muslim Brotherhood in Palestine caused Israel no real concern. On the contrary, the Israelis appreciated the Brothers because they offered an alternative to the PLO, and because they seemed to be primarily concerned with missionary activities and social service. They were perceived favorably, as they had been by Sadat early on, as enemies of their enemies. In the case of the Israelis, those enemies were Fatah and the PLO.

When the first Intifada started in December 1987, however, the Brothers created Hamas and took part as an opponent of Israel. This new incarnation of the Palestinian branch of the Brotherhood now advocated violence, but its primary goal remained the ouster of the PLO from power within Palestine. This became a rather long campaign, and it is evident in hindsight that the Oslo peace process was actually an attempt by both the PLO and the Israelis to marginalize Hamas—to keep it from becoming a part of the ruling Palestine establishment. The failure of the Oslo peace process and the second Intifada put this matter on the table again, of course, and ultimately led to the political failure of the PLO and to Hamas's political victory in the elections of late January 2006.

These developments have focused attention on a quintessential contradiction within the Muslim Brotherhood movement: Hamas is a group that has used violence, such as suicide bombings, to gain political clout but has nevertheless successfully fielded candidates in legitimate elections. The effect of Hamas's actions on the Islamist movement as a whole is striking. Illustrative of the reaction are Zawahiri's videos, which convey absolute fury with Hamas for taking part in and winning elections. He and others say that Hamas represents a betrayal of the Islamic cause, and have argued that Hamas's path would lead only to more catastrophes for the Islamic movement.

The Brotherhood in Crisis

WHILE THE BROTHERHOOD FACES BIG QUESTIONS IN THIS NEW ERA, SO DOES the West. It must decide if Hamas is part of the problem in Palestine and Israel, or part of the solution. How should Western countries, which supported the Brothers in the past when they fought against the leftists, now see Hamas? How should they deal with a movement soaked in the blood of so many Israelis and other Palestinians as well? In the wake of the crisis that left the Gaza Strip entirely in the hands of Hamas and the West Bank more or less under the control of the PLO and Israel, these questions will not go away.

During a recent trip to Gaza, I interviewed Mahmoud Zahar and asked him how he saw the future of Palestine. Five years ago, in response to the same question, he

had told me that the whole of Palestine would one day be Islamic; the Jews would either be driven out or be dead. This time around, however, Zahar insisted that he had become more pragmatic. He now recognized that Israel was indeed a fact and had to be dealt with. Hamas wants, he said, to be a part of any negotiations.

No one is obliged to believe him, of course. Some will surely argue that Zahar is insincere and simply compelled to say this because of Hamas's current position of weakness. But I think that such a statement is nonetheless significant because of what it reveals about the Brotherhood, not only in Palestine, but also in Egypt, Turkey and other countries—namely, that the Brothers' own political practice now stands in contradiction to its ideology. The Brothers are torn between radical politics, which have been somewhat discredited by al-Qaeda's failure to move forward, and a mode of dealing with the West and with the democratic system that they fear will destroy them.

In the 1930s and 40s, the Brotherhood was a cohesive movement with a coherent ideology. It had a very clear set of ideas that it sought to implement, and this attracted many followers. I would contend that today the doubts and contradictions arising from the Brothers' loss of a clear message, as well as from the divisions within the larger Islamist movement, have relegated the Brotherhood to a position of political and ideological weakness. In light of the Brothers' apparent strength in electoral terms, this conclusion may seem paradoxical. But a sound analysis of the Brothers' current thinking and activities is necessary to understand fully the reasons for this weakness.