



The Society of the “Muslim Brothers” in Egypt: Evolution and Ideology

Mohammad Ibrahim Khaja

Department of Political Science, University of Kashmir, J&K, India

Abstract

Founded in 1928 in Egypt, the Society of the Muslim Brothers (or the Muslim Brethren or Muslim Brotherhood or MB) is arguably one of the most influential and oldest Islamic revivalist movements. Founded in Egypt by a charismatic school-teacher, Hasan al-Banna, in the backdrop of Western imperialism in Egypt, dissolution of Ottoman Empire and growing secularization of the public sphere, the Brotherhood movement has become transnational and resolute to reassert Islam in every walk of life. The Brotherhood's emergence was a response to the changed social circumstances in late 18th and early 20th century the Middle East in general and Egypt in particular, and the natural outgrowth of Islamic intellectual responses to the discourse of modernity. The present study shall attempt to explore the background and social origins of Islamic revivalism in 19th century Egypt and its impact on the birth of Muslim Brotherhood. The study shall also throw light on the metamorphosis of its ideology since its formation.

Keywords: Egypt; Muslim Brotherhood; Islamic revivalism; Islamism; Ulema; Hassan al-Banna

Background

In the past century, the political disempowerment of Muslims led to the emergence of a series of resurgence movements in different parts of the world. This disempowerment made itself vivid in the form of the shrinking Islamic civilization, a decline in political power, inability to cope with the steadily rising West in the field of science and technology, economic backwardness and intellectual atrophy. The Muslim responses to this disempowerment varied from calls by secular Europeanized modernists to embrace modernity and shed Islamic tradition for social progress to a wholesale rejection of anything associated with the West by religious conservatives to voices for reconciliation between Islam and modernity. One such response to the West's tremendous rise in the field of scientific, economic and political spheres after displacing Islam as a dominant civilization came from those who viewed this Muslim fall from grace as a result of failure to adopt Islamic teachings in different facets of life and stressed the viability of Islam as an all-encompassing source of guidance in modern times. These Islamic revivalists argue that Islam has all ingredients of a thriving civilization and is not necessarily incompatible with economic prosperity, human freedom, rationality, representative governments, and science & technology. They seek to make Islam the center of socio-political and economic transformation. They refuse to confine Islam to personal piety and observance of individual religious rituals and prayers. Rather, they want the social order to be shaped by the principles of *Sharia*.

In the Middle East and North Africa, the ideological seeds of these revivalist ideas were sown by Muslim revivalist thinkers like Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838-1839), Muhammed Abduh (1849-1905), Rashid Rida (1865-1935), among others. Towards the close of 19th century, various social movements, societies and religious organizations were established in the Muslim lands to seek revival of Islam at individual and societal level. The Society of the Muslim Brothers was one such revivalist movement initiated on the teachings of 19th-century Islamic reformists. Before going into the details about the Muslim Brotherhood, a brief description of these revivalist thinkers and the social ferment of that time become essential:

Jamal Din Al-Afghani (1838-1897)

There is no consensus among scholars about the birth and early life of Jamal Din Al-Afghani. Al-Afghani was a modernist reformer, a pan-Islamist, and the co-founder of *Sallafiyah* movement (Jackson, 2006) along with Mohammad Abduh. A controversial political activist though, Al-Afghani travelled widely in Muslim lands to awaken Muslims from a slavish imitation of the West and to revive the core principles of Islamic faith in daily lives. He called on Muslim states to unite against the European onslaught on Islamic identity. He was apprehensive that western scientific and technological supremacy not only lead to political and economic deprivation in Muslim lands but it also posed threat to Islam itself.

He rejected the views of conservative *ulemas* who considered modernization essentially incompatible with Islam. Al-Afghani argued that modernization was both compatible with Islam and essential for Muslims. In the discourse on religion versus reason, Al-Afghani believed that science and faith are not mutually exclusive. He sought growth of reason and science but without rejecting Islamic faith. For him, science was not alien to Muslim tradition. In the heydays of Islamic rule Muslims made great achievements in the field of science and later European scientists enormously benefitted from the works left by the Muslim scientists in Middle Ages. He argued that at the climax of Islamic civilization Islamic community led the world in the field of science as well. Islam was a religion of reason and open to new interpretations by scholars of each generation. Al-Afghani was not a serious thinker but a zealous activist. He exhorted Muslims to shed passivity, blind fatalism and embrace *ijtihad*. He rejected the view that Islam was essentially anti-scientific in nature. He blamed political despotism and not the religion for this behaviour. Apart from the religious revival, Al-Afghani struggled for political reforms and demanded the end of tyranny in Muslim lands. He viewed science, rationality and patriotism-cardinal values of the West- as the essence of Islam. In the political sphere, Al-Afghani advocated the adoption of a republican government in which citizens participate in the affairs of state. Although a pan-Islamist he would use nationalist terminology as a tool to mobilize public sentiments against the European encroachment of Muslim lands. Al-Afghani located the secret of the European success in its ability to control knowledge and its effective application in solving problems of society; weaknesses of Muslims stems from their ignorance. He wanted Muslims to learn European arts but not to ape them slavishly. Muslim countries were weak because Muslim societies were in decay (Hourani, 1983).

Mohammad Abduh (1849- 1905)

Born in a religious family in the Delta region of the Egypt Mohammad Abduh was a more systematic thinker than Al-Afghani and had a more lasting influence on Muslims not only in Egypt but far beyond (Hourani, 1983). Abduh is remembered as the father of Islamic modernism in the Arab World (Armajani, 2012). He was influenced by Afghani when the latter visited Egypt in 1877 and both collaborated on many fronts, including the publication of *al urwatul wuthqa* (The Indissoluble Link). Like Afghani, he too believed that Islam contained in itself the virtues of a rational religion, social science and moral code which could serve as the basis of modern life.

He argued that Islam constitutes two spheres-First, doctrinal and essential principles about major questions of human existence, divinity, and scripture. Second, there are things which can be known by reason. Like Al-Afghani, Abduh was convinced that Muslim nations could not become strong and prosperous again until they mastered the knowledge of sciences which were the product of creativity of the mind. And this could be done without abandoning Islam

(**Armajani, 2012**). Abduh addressed two principal issues of law and education in Islamic terms. As a prerequisite to change Egyptian laws which were imported from Europe and were unfit for the Egyptian milieu, Abduh suggested the Islamization of education. Once the educational system was changed and a class of Islamically-informed intellectuals surfaces the European laws would be critiqued and replaced by the Egyptian laws (**Hourani, 1983**). Abduh did not favour radical means of social transformation as espoused by Afghani and instead emphasized gradual and piecemeal means. Like Afghani, he did not reject western ideas and methods completely. Rather he believed that it is possible for Muslims to carefully adopt such ideas which lead to social progress without infringing upon the tenets of Islam.

Rashid Rida (1865-1935)

Rashid Rida carried forward the intellectual tradition of Abduh and Afghani. He responded to the challenge of Muslim decline by drawing from the Islamic tradition. To meet the challenges of modern times he wanted Muslims to look into the original sources of Islam rather than the non-Islamic social philosophies of the West. He advocated that Islam constitutes three categories- doctrines, rules, and rituals governing human relationships (*muamalat*) (**Enayat, 1982**). It is only the third category which permits human effort and leaves scope for interpretation to meet the needs of the time. The basis of the reform is the welfare of *Ummah*. Doctrines and rituals are perfected in detail and do not need change (**Badawi, 1978**). Therefore, social interaction (*muamalat*) revolves, in the view of *Sharia*, on the principle of preventing harm and protecting what is useful.

Like Afghani and Abduh, he was deeply moved by the declining state of affairs in Muslim societies. He was appalled by falling moral standards and adoption of immodest dress code and a permissive culture in Muslim societies. To control the obnoxious cultural, political and economic influence of colonial forces upon Muslim life he attempted to conceive of ways to reassert vivid truthfulness of Islam after practicing it in everyday lives.

Rida like his predecessors believed that Muslim backwardness needs to be located in the inability of Muslim societies to embrace divine faith in its true spirit. He believed that Muslim should learn modern technical skills apart from being grounded well in Islam. Like Afghani and Abdu, Rida visualized the urge of unity in *Ummah* as an essential prerequisite for overthrowing the corrupt influences of Western colonialism. By unity, he never meant a united *sharia*-driven state. It entailed general agreement among Muslims to coexist with each other in a state of mutual tolerance to struggle for active work in implementing the teachings of Islam. Whereas Afghani was a more politician than a theorist, and Abdu more a theorist than a politician, it could be said that Rida was skilled in both the arts (**Jackson, 2006**).

Rida represents a curious amalgam of conservatism and modernism. On the one hand, he was a great advocate of consultation in the political process as well as supporting the *maliki* principle of *maslaha* on the basis of the legal decision. On the other, he viewed modernity with distrust and skepticism.

The intellectual ingredients provided by the late 19th century Islamic revivalists like Afghani, Abduh and Rida, among others, on the one hand, and growing footprints of the British imperial control in Egypt and dissolution of Ottoman caliphate, on the other, set the stage for birth of modern Islamic revivalist movements in Middle East and elsewhere.

The Society of the Muslim Brothers or Muslim Brotherhood or *Ikhwan ul Muslimoon* was one such Islamic revivalist movement founded in Egypt by a school teacher Hasan Al Banna in 1928. Al Banna dedicated himself for the Islamization of Egyptian society after the abolition of

Ottoman caliphate and after witnessing the intimidating presence of British imperialism. He forwarded the revivalist tradition through social activism and formed the Muslim Brotherhood movement with specific objectives (**Ramadan, 2012**): ‘a return to Islam, the programme of mass education, social and economic reform, implementing Islamic legislation, and, in the long run, setting up an Islamic state’. The Muslim Brotherhood spread its reach quickly and its branches were established in Sudan, Syria, Lebanon, Kuwait, and Palestine, where members of the Brotherhood had been dispatched to oppose and to resist Zionist designs (**Michell, 1969**). The intellectual and ideological ferment provided by the 19th century revivalist thinkers was successfully utilized by the Brotherhood to organize itself into a transnational Islamist organization dedicated to the promotion of Islam in public lives of Muslims. It grew in numbers and in late 1940’s the Brethren claimed to have 1.5 million members, supporters, and sympathizers (**Michell, 1969**).

Since its inception, the Brotherhood had tense relations with the Egyptian secular regimes and had for the most part been declared illegal and forbidden. Its founder and main ideologue Hasan al-Banna was assassinated by the government, its chief ideologue Sayyid Qutb and others were hanged for allegedly inciting violence in 1966 by the Egyptian state (**Abu-Rabi, 1996**). The Muslim Brotherhood stood largely banned and persecuted in Egypt by the secular regimes.

Muslim Brotherhood: The Ideological Evolution

The core ideological principles of the Muslim Brotherhood remained largely constant over the years but a change of strategies occurred from time to time in response to varied internal and external factors. It passed through four distinct four ideological phases. According to **Altman (2009)**, ‘the first phase, from the MB’s foundation in 1928 to the 1952 Revolution, characterized educational or missionary (*dawah*) work for the Islamization of society and the creation of an Islamic state as a gradual, multi-stage, bottom-up process’. The second phase witnessed rivalry and tensions with military regime of Gamal Nasser after the Brotherhood was charged with harbouring militant factions within its fold and posing challenges to the state. It was dissolved by the military regime in 1954, its members were persecuted and its organizational structure was paralyzed. Towards the end of the period, radical factions inspired by the writings of Sayyid Qutb emerged that broke away from the Brotherhood and resorted to violent means.

The third phase is that of the “Second Republic,” under Presidents Anwar Sadat and Hosni Mubarak. In this phase, the MB rejected violent groups and their *takfiri* ideas and embraced democratic and parliamentary methods unambiguously. It worked for gradual Islamization through a “bottom-up” *dawah* method, social activism and political participation. In this phase, it partnered with secular parties and contested elections in the semi-authoritarian setting. It operated within the political system as a legitimate, open and constitutional oppositional force with an Islamic signature.

The fourth phase is that of the Muslim Brotherhood coming to power through a democratic process in the wave of anti-Mubarak popular revolt in 2011. In his brief tenure Mohamad Morsi, Egypt’s first democratically elected president tried to gradually work upon the classical Brotherhood agenda of moralizing society on Islamic lines through the state apparatus. After barely a year in power, he was removed in a military coup by Feteah el-Sisi at the behest of the United States, Israel and the secular elements within Egypt. The short-lived democratic experiment in Egypt again failed and the Brotherhood has again declared an illegal and subjected to persecution (**Mellor, 2018**).

MB's Core Ideological Positions

(a) Gradualism

Al-Banna envisioned the Muslim Brotherhood to work on gradualist lines of social reform. He worked for Islamization of the Egyptian society through a gradual process of educating individuals on Islamic lines so that the foundation is laid for the formation of an Islamically-ordered family and the finally the society based on *Sharia*. Banna had no intention to impose *Sharia* from above through an Islamic state. For, he believed that the defining feature of the Islamic order was the governance of *Sharia* rather than the establishment of the caliphate. Since the movement has the objective of gradual socio-political and economic transformation through *dawah* work, the use of violence was never an option. The epistles of the Banna which shaped much of the ideology of the movement and the writings of middle generation brethren leadership and thinkers rejected violence as a means of comprehensive Islamic reform. From its inception, the philosophy of the Muslim Brotherhood was non-violent and legalist. Hassan al-Banna was determined to work within the framework of the law and rejected those suspected of committing acts of violence in the organization's name. Formerly denounced by many as a terrorist organization, the Muslim Brotherhood has been labelled by most current scholars of the Middle East as moderate, centrist, and accommodative to Egypt's political and governmental structures.

(b) Imperialism

Islamic resurgence movements in general and the Muslim Brotherhood in particular view European presence in Muslim lands with a sense of contempt. The colonial powers drain the resources of the Muslim lands, create animosity among Muslims and strip Muslims off the Islamic values and identity. The Brothers viewed with suspicion the missionary schools, their curriculum, and mode of teaching. It was a cultural imperialism at its best (Hawwa, 1983). Among other things, it spreads disbelief in religion since Europeans had lost faith in the efficacy of their religion they thought same about other religions as well. The way to combat this menace was to decolonize Muslim societies, shed European values and culture and Islamize education which would, in turn, shape social mores, ethics and legislation on Islamic lines. The Muslim Brotherhood's objective of an Islamically-informed social order is contingent upon its effective educational system and the adoption of an authentic Islamic value system.

(c) Secularism

The position of the Brothers with regard to secularism stems from their understanding of Islam and politics. They reject the secular creed of confining religion to the spiritual and personal lives of people and stripping it off any role in social organization. To the Muslim Brothers, Islam embraces all aspects of a Muslim's life and serves as a guidebook in individual and collective activity. Explicating the scope of Islam, Al-Banna states, "*We believe the provisions of Islam and its teachings are all-in elusive, encompassing the affairs of the people in this world and the hereafter. And those who think that these teachings are concerned only with the spiritual or ritualistic aspects are mistaken in this belief because Islam is a faith and a ritual, a nation (watan) and a nationality, a religion and a state, a spirit and deed, holy text and sword. The Glorious Quran considers these things to be the core of Islam and its essence*" (Banna, n.d.). Since secularism advocates division of human life into temporal and spiritual areas and that temporal life should be governed by human-made laws free from the clutches of religion. In Europe secularism was born out of a long drawn struggle between the Church and the State for legitimate authority. Consequently, the state got the freedom to operate outside the influence of religion. European modernity was thus conceived after divorcing religion from politics and keeping the

former subservient to latter. In the heydays of modernity, religion was viewed in the West essentially inhibitive of progress. Europe got enlightenment only when reason conquered the dogmatism of religion. For the brothers, Islam has a different history and experience. Before Islam Arabs were a population of warring tribes who lacked every semblance of progress and civilization. Islam came as a saviour. It brought the first generation of Muslims out of ignorance and barbarianism; it gave them socio-economic prosperity and bestowed upon them vast resources. Islam gave Muslims a viable civilization and a complete set of rules to lead humankind in every area of life. Hence, Islam was not the cause of Muslim miseries, rather the lack of it caused Muslim downfall.

(d) Divine Sovereignty (*Hakimiyyah*)

In the classical Brotherhood discourse, secularism amounts to polytheism. Giving people, individual or an assembly of them, the authority to make laws for other people amounts to usurpation of the divine authority and subjecting men to the slavery of other men (**Esposito, 2013**). For Islamists, allegiance to Islam completes only when the injunctions of God enshrined in Quran and the Prophetic tradition are implemented in practical lives at the societal level. Since it is the providence of state to implement social order through legislation and moral codes, therefore an Islamic state is one where laws are made on the broad outlines of *Sharia*. One group of humans cannot justify or permit something which is basically declared unjustified or forbidden by God no matter if it involves human consent. Secularism goes contrary to Islamic faith because it refuses to take inspiration from any divine source of law or restrains human freedom in matters of legislation, judgments and moral codes. This, however, doesn't mean that the brothers want to create a cleric-run theocratic regime as was the case with Christianity before the Reformation.

(e) The Renewal

The Brothers believe that Islam contains all elements of the desired renewal; it brought an outstanding reformation of Arab society centuries ago and gave Muslims a permanence and leadership role. What has been gained once can't be gained again? Islam has the potential to restore the glory back to Muslims. The fall of Muslims from the worldly grace and their disintegration were caused due to Muslims' forsaking the teachings of Islam contained in the holy Quran and the traditions of Muhammad (PBUH). The brotherhood like earlier Islamic revivalists locate the causes of temporal decadence in Muslim society essentially caused by lack of strong faith and committed following of the religious creed. The Brothers are convinced that at the pinnacle of its glorious past Islam wasn't confined to a private life of the individual, rather it was an evident reality present in every area of collective life. Making a dogmatic creed out of the living faith caused decadence in Islam and Muslim societies. Islam in its all-encompassing sense is the pivot around which the whole saga of Muslim revival revolves.

Conclusion

In this context, the Brothers took it upon themselves to redeem Muslim societies in general and Egyptian society in particular through the message of Islam. The establishment of a socio-economic and political order guided by Islam that not only challenges the West's doctrines but also provides a better alternative for human emancipation sums up the ideology of Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. However, the MB has been subjected to official control and persecutions. In the Western academia and policy circles, the MB is generally viewed as a radical organization that poses serious challenges to the peaceful coexistence with the Judeo-Christian world or within plural Muslim societies itself. This, however, is not the case. The

Jihadist groups that emerged after 1970's were in fact disillusioned with the Brethren's peaceful and democratic methods. Moreover, quite lately, the Egyptian Brotherhood has adopted a more accommodative stance on women rights, political parties, parliamentary democracy and human rights. The denial of democratic space and the persecution that the movement undergoes currently may create disillusionment about democratic means and radicalize the movement or create a division among its ranks. Moreover, shrinking the democratic space for the movement may create a vacuum which can be filled by radical Jihadists. Mainstream Islamism that the Brotherhood represents is the most viable alternative to arrest the spread of radical Jihadist groups like ISIS. In its absence, extremists will take the center-stage who would enjoin people to join Jihad rather than contest elections (**Armajani, 2012**).

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Corresponding author

Mohammad Ibrahim Khaja can be contacted at: ibrahimkhaja799@gmail.com

Author biography

Mohammad Ibrahim Khaja is currently pursuing his PhD in the Department of Political Science, University of Kashmir, India. He also teaches Political Science at Govt. Women College, Baramulla, Jammu & Kashmir, India.