

The Muslim Brotherhood: Real Moderate?

- The Muslim Brotherhood is a pan-Islamist political movement founded in 1928 by Hassan al-Banna in Egypt in opposition to democratic and secular trends.
- As an Islamist and political movement, the Muslim Brothers aim at establishing Islamic regimes exploiting Western institutions and promoting the return to a pure, original Islam.
- The organisation has a social mission, carrying out charitable activities which brought a wide consensus among poor people.
- The Muslim Brotherhood rapidly spreads in North Africa, Middle East and Russia. Totalitarian regimes repress this movement which jeopardises their secular power. Similarly, Wahhabi theocracies repress the Muslim Brothers who jeopardise their tyrannical regimes.
- These repressions led many leaders of the Muslim Brothers to exile in Europe, where they gained consensus among Muslim youth through mosques, Koranic schools and charitable organisations.
- After the Arab revolutions, the Muslim Brothers secured power in Egypt and Tunisia thank to the people's support consolidated over the years. However, due to their lack of governing capabilities, they failed to enact the reforms which people asked for, while focusing on turning the countries into Islamic states.
- The pacifist Islamism of the Muslim Brotherhood attracted the support of many European leaders, in the attempt to build an institutional dialogue with the Muslim population living in Europe. However, the main objective of the Brotherhood is to establish an Islamic state, although using the language of human rights and democracy.
- The Islamist social network of the Brotherhood is responsible for increasing the jihadist appeal among radicalised youth suffering from identity crisis.
- The often unclear connections with jihadist organisations led UK Premier Cameron to start an investigation on the Muslim Brothers' activities in UK.
- The apparently moderated positions and the Westernised image led the Muslim Brothers and their affiliated associations to be the institutional partners of European governments, which empowered them in lobbying and consolidating their primacy among Muslims in Europe.

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What is the impact of the Arab Spring in Europe?

In the first place, the so-called “Arab Spring” has had the effect of legitimising the Muslim Brothers. The Tunisian president Ben Ali left the country in 2011, and the major media outlets in Europe began interviewing the opposition, which was not the local opponents to the regime, but instead they gave voice to those political figure residing in Europe who are known as “moderate extremists” – i.e. the Muslim Brothers. One example is the BBC1, which interviewed Ghannouchi, the Tunisian leader of the Muslim Brothers then in exile in London.

It is therefore clear that the legitimisation of the Muslim Brotherhood in both the Islamic and Western world has strengthened the Islamist movement. The second effect is that the so-called “Islamic communities” in Great Britain, France, Italy and other European countries have become the institutional partner in the dialogue with Islam.

Are you referring to the Islamic Councils, the Unions of Islamic Communities that represent European Muslims?

Contrary to what is common belief, I contest the idea that they are communities. One has to understand that they are simple associations and not real communities as one can think of Christian communities. They are associations denominated as communities. The Islamic religion does not have an authority comparable to the Pope in the Catholic world, and not even priests, in that the imams serve as guides of the prayer. But the Western projection of the concept of community over the Islamic association makes their leaders become some sort of authority.

What does this imply for European politics?

These associations have strengthened since they have become the partners of European institutions, become real lobbies. This process has a tremendous impact in terms of legitimising an Islam that is not representative of the Muslim world in Europe and that has precise goals, which are securing the power to establish an Islamic regime, although they intend to achieve this goal through moderate means.

Are you implying that the “moderate Islam” we talk about is not so moderate?

There are words that are commonly used to describe Islam, which are inappropriate because they refer to concepts that are alien to the Islamic thought. Moderation for the Muslim Brothers means gradualness. Therefore what happened is that the West has given authority to people who are not representative of the complex Islamic world and that pursue specific goals according to a global strategy. As Churchill would say, we are feeding the crocodile hoping it would eat us last.

What are the reasons of such a political fault?

There is a precise reason for this that has never been openly said. We all know that in the West, in the US and Europe, the majority of the mosques are under the control of associations ideologically siding with the Muslim Brotherhood, and therefore the West has

come to an agreement, whereby the Muslim Brothers would prevent the Salfists from taking over the mosques in order to keep the internal security, while in the Mediterranean they would have freedom of action. But this agreement may have devastating consequences, because it paved the way to radical Islam.

It seems, though, that political Islam is being kept back at least in Egypt.

The Arab revolution in Egypt has ended in a popular protest against Morsi, the President from the Muslim Brotherhood. 30 million Egyptians – that means 10 million more of Morsi's voters – got to the street to protest against the Muslim Brothers, who went to power because of their extraordinary social consensus. Where the regime was absent, the Muslim Brothers provided education, health, religious and social services, gaining the sympathy of the poor. They actually bought their votes by distributing food and through their charity activities, by becoming the greatest NGO of the country. Their social activities have been defined as “humanitarian jihad”, which brought them to power.

However they were eventually overthrown.

After the elections, the people realised that nothing changed and that the new regime reveals its true intentions, proving to be nothing but the Islamic version of the establishment that preceded it. After mediating between Israel and Hamas, Morsi secured all constitutional powers. Al-Sisi, on the contrary, is considered reliable and in spite of not being democratic, this regime may be positive for Egypt.

Even in Tunisia the Muslim Brothers have failed in maintaining power.

Tunisia is however a different case. After the independence, the President Habib Bourguiba promoted secularism. It was a dictatorship, but civil society has developed, including civil rights and women associations. Tunisia much more than Egypt is open to secular culture, with a political tradition that has consolidated since the 19th century, which has promoted a reformed and open Islam. Again, the Muslim Brothers won because they were extremely organised.

How did they react to the failure?

Rachid al-Ghannouchi, the Tunisian leader of the Muslim Brotherhoods, is a pragmatic Islamist. He knows that sometimes one has to step back in order to achieve one's goals, and that is why he resigned from power. In May 2014, the Arabic newspaper Al-Sharq Al-Awsat interviewed Ghannouchi who said that the Muslim Brothers lost power for ingenuity. They are pragmatic, and moderation for them is gradualness – an attitude that one can discern in Erdogan's politics. But what Tunisia really shows is that the Muslim Brotherhood is a global movement, with different political strategies but with the common goal of establishing an Islamic regime.

How are the Muslim Brothers in Europe?

In Great Britain, the premier Cameron started an inquiry on the Muslim Brotherhood; in response, their leader Ibrahim Munir said to the press that the Muslim Brothers have always been transparent, establishing friendly relations with the institutions and the political world. It is an extraordinary assertion! For years, Europe has considered Islamic associations as partners for dialogue, although ideologically related to the Muslim Brotherhood, so one cannot suddenly turn them into terrorists without the West's credibility being squandered.

Are there other countries in which the Muslim Brothers are strong?

In May, the press circulated the news that the Muslim Brotherhood would settle its headquarters in Austria, eventually denied. However, this is a significant change. Austria is the only country which ever since 1812 has a law recognising Islam as a religion and granting all associational rights. Austria will increasingly become a key country for Islam in Europe. There is a political debate regarding the change of this ancient law, designed to integrate Muslim Bosnians in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and which has now to face contemporary Islam. Those Islamic associations that opposed the reform indeed belong to the ideological world of the Muslim Brotherhood.

You claim that considering Islamic groups as communities is wrong. Why?

As long as the West will believe in the existence of an “Islamic community”, the Muslim Brothers will control Europe. The Muslim Brothers are the real supporters of the “Islamic community”, which is alien to Islamic social organisation, fragmented ever since the Prophet Muhammad’s death. Furthermore, Muslims in Europe have different national, ethnic, linguistic and cultural heritage, and by construing an inexistent Islamic community one just strengthen the Muslim Brotherhood, excluding the seculars, who do not belong to religious associations. We need to get away with the idea of community, which does not fit the Islamic thought.

The second effect of the “Arab spring” is the rise of jihadism. How far-reaching are its consequences?

Jihadism is the natural consequence of the revolutions. The Muslim Brothers are just the tip of the iceberg; but by legitimising them, the Salafists also gained momentum. I call them the “Islamic extreme right”, and they are the other face of the Muslim Brothers, to whom they are functional, because while jihadists are extremists, the Muslim Brothers do not officially promote violence. Thank to the Salafists, the Muslims Brothers result to be moderate who do not engage in violent acts, in spite of sharing the same values and objectives.

Are you implying that the Muslim Brothers condone jihadism?

A leader of the Muslim Brotherhood can legitimise a jihadist act by a simple declaration, while the actual job is carried out by a jihadist. What is difficult to understand is that moderates and jihadists share the same objectives. The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, for instance, aims at establishing an Islamic state, which is what the Muslim Brotherhood leader Mohammed Mahdi Akef declared some months ago in an interview given to a Norwegian TV: the objective of the Muslim Brothers is the creation of a universal Islamic state, with the only difference that they can achieve this goals by democratic means even if it will take a long time, while jihadists want it now.

Is this what Europe does not understand?

Precisely. Just see the motto and the logo of the Muslim Brother: a Quran with two swords, a suggestive symbol by itself, and the word “a’iddu”, “and prepare”, which is from the Quran 8:60, “and prepare against them whatever you are able of power and of steeds of war by which you may terrify the enemy of Allah and your enemy and others besides them whom you do not know [but] whom Allah knows”. And the word terrify, is the same root of the word “irhab”, which means terrorism in Arabic. If the West will not recognise this reality, it is designed to be slave of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Are jihadists strengthening in Europe?

Jihadism is widespread in Europe. Thousands of combatants left Europe for Syria and now they are living for Iraq. The Muslim Brothers are increasing among Islamic youth and student associations in Europe, by promoting a schizophrenic identity. I witnessed this phenomenon once I gave a speech in Verona, in Northern Italy. A veiled girl, clearly belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood movement, approached me and told me in an Italian with a heavy local accent “I vote al-Nahda in Tunisia”, the radical Islamic party. This is the result of identity schizophrenia, whereby these youth are divided between a Western society and an Islamic identity. This gap may often lead to jihadism, as the recent attack against the Jewish Museum in Bruxelles shows. There are thousand of these ticking bombs, which may explode or not.

Are there positive signs?

Something has changed, because the danger is growing. Still, for lack of honesty and education the West fails to understand the phenomenon. Terrorism explained as resistance is the best example. Any member of the Muslim Brotherhood would condemn terrorism publicly, but just because the right question is never asked, which is “what do you mean for terrorism?” The answer would be a condemnation of terrorism and a praise for resistance. Again, the Muslim Brothers speak of liberty, but in an Islamic sense, limited therefore by the Islamic law, which entails the prohibition to change religion. The problem is that we use the same words, but with extraordinarily different concepts.

Multiculturalism is functional in the consolidation of Islamic extremists. Do you consider human rights theories and pluralism theories failing to address this issue?

Absolutely. The first fault is to consider that human rights are universal. There is a Cairo Declaration of Human Rights, adopted in 1998, that explains what human rights are in Islam. Art. 11 of the declaration states that Islam is the natural religion of men: the assumption is that Islam is the universal religion abandoned by men in different contexts and in different times. Indeed, Islam has not got any initiation ritual after the birth, because one is automatically Muslim if born to a Muslim father, without the possibility of changing. The Sudanese Maryam Yahya has been recently arrested for having married a Christian man and officially she is considered Muslim, although she grew with her Christian mother and Christianity is all she knows. Human rights in Islam are different from what we conceptualise as fundamental rights. In name of tolerance and respect, one accepts and justifies attitudes that are opposed from within the Islamic world! It is a perverse phenomenon because cultural relativism is functional to Islam, which is itself relativist as the Organisation of Islamic Conference shows by condemning terrorism but promoting violence.

The West was wrong to back the Muslim Brothers. Are there alternatives?

I have for long focused on the secular thought in Islam, but I think that seculars, although being important in terms of civil rights and freedoms, are disregarded in the Islamic religious world and considered apostates, foreigners. The other alternative is the way of Islamic theologians that within Islam arrive to secular conclusions. Gamal al-Banna, the brother of Hassan, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, is an extraordinary thinker, an Islamic theologian who elaborating on Islamic sources maintains that the integral veil is a crime, using the Arabic word “garima”, and that the veil is not Islamic, but a tradition that women should be free to follow. Gamal al-Banna is a courageous thinker who wants to

reform Islam from within and wrote texts on human rights, criticising the Muslim Brotherhood.

These theologians, who are really moderate, are accused of apostasy, are isolated, but they are showing the alternative to follow because it is within Islam and it may appeal to the masses. Seculars operate outside the Islamic religious world, missing a real social basis and speaking a language that people do not understand.

But the West does not fund them and their message does not spread. Another prophetic intellectual was Faraj Foda, later killed by the Muslim Brothers, who wrote in 1980s two relevant texts on terrorism and on Islamic radicalism, in which he denounced the peril of the Muslim Brotherhood. This is what we need, knowing and circulating these ideas. But it does not seem so easy.