



### Too Early to Eulogize the Muslim Brotherhood

Ofir Winter

#### *The Failure of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Arab World*

by Nawaf Obaid

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339 pages

The title of the book by Saudi researcher Nawaf Obaid provides an unequivocal conclusion: the Muslim Brotherhood has suffered a definitive failure in its attempt to take over the Arab world. In doing so, the book joins other titles in recent years that have analyzed the decisive downfall of the Muslim Brotherhood movement in Egypt, after it gained power early in the Arab Spring and lost it only one year later (Hellyer, 2016; Trager, 2016). But Obaid, who relies in his book on evidence and impressions that he gathered over the 15 years that he served as an advisor to the Saudi government, offers an additional, singular claim: the failure of the Muslim Brotherhood extends beyond Egypt, and includes the other Arab countries where it operates.

The book comprises an introduction, ten thematic chapters, and a conclusion. Two of the chapters are dedicated to the Muslim Brotherhood movement in Egypt and four deal with the movement in other countries, grouped

by broader regional division (North Africa, the Levant, the Arabian Gulf, and the Qatar-Turkey axis). The last four chapters examine specific current issues: the crisis between Qatar and the Arab Quartet (Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain); the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi; the significance of the concept of *salafiyya*; and the geostrategic consequences of what the author calls “the failure of the Muslim Brotherhood.”

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The emphasis in the title on the movement’s failure in the Arab world hints that this is not necessarily the case in other arenas. And indeed, from the first pages of the book to its end, it seems that one of its aims is to delegitimize the Muslim Brotherhood movement among Western audiences. The problem is not the author’s criticism of the movement or his attempt to dispel the illusions that prevail in certain academic and other circles in the West regarding its democratic nature, but rather the inaccuracies in his book. The book provides a one-dimensional description of the movement as a global network that advocates violence and terrorism and projects an anti-Western ideology. This simplistic description might serve the agenda of the author, but it harms the credibility of the overall message that his book seeks to convey.

The opening chapter is dedicated to the parent movement of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, which was founded by Hassan al-Banna in 1928 in order to reinstate Islam as the exclusive parameter for all aspects of life in the modern era. The sketch of the ideological character of the movement is deficient on several fundamental

issues. One is the Muslim Brotherhood's attitude toward violence against a regime that does not in its view apply *sharia* law. According to Obaid, "In its very DNA, the Muslim Brotherhood is a revolutionary organization, primarily outfitted for turning against and seeking to overthrow the government through violence" (p. 14). In fact, reading the movement's writings over the generations indicates its consistent preference for changes in the internal order of the regime implemented through political and social activity. Furthermore, it rejects the use of violence against despotic Muslim rulers, under almost any condition, out of a sober assessment of the low chances of success and the fear of anarchy and bloodshed (Shavit, 2015).

There is also a skewed discussion of the teachings of Sayyid Qutb, one of the most influential ideologues of the movement in the 1950s and 1960s, who was executed in 1966 during the rule of Gamal Abdel Nasser. Obaid depicts Qutb as having called for armed and violent jihad against the regime (pp. 9-14). *Milestones*, the book written by Qutb while in prison, was indeed adopted as an ideological foundation by violent jihad movements that operated in Egypt in the 1970s and afterwards (Qutb, 2007). However, the violent interpretation of *Milestones* was rejected by the mainstream of the Muslim Brotherhood and remained the domain of marginal currents. Furthermore, Obaid does not mention that Qutb's approach developed at a time when the Muslim Brotherhood suffered from suppression—circumstances that encouraged extremists to give up on integration in the political system that categorically denied them entry, and to resort to violence (Winter, 1989).

Presenting its ideology as anti-Western also does not acknowledge the full complexity of the movement's ideas. The author rightly notes that the Islamic modernism that influenced al-Banna strives for the golden mean between selective adoption of aspects of Western culture and the retention of Islamic identity and tradition. However, Obaid's argument that al-

Banna worked to establish an Islamic caliphate that would extend all the way to Europe is not accompanied by a clarification that this vision was meant to be fulfilled through non-violent religious preaching, and not by force. Also missing (pp. 3-4, 14-17) is the distinction between the Brotherhood's conception of the renewal of the Islamic caliphate as a long-term objective and the aspiration of Salafi-jihadist movements, such as the Islamic State, to reestablish the caliphate here and now (Winter, 2015).

More successful, even if it is not especially original, is the explanation that Obaid offers in the third chapter for the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood's failure to leverage its electoral achievements after the Arab Spring toward consolidation of its rule. In his words, the quick fall in 2013 of Egypt's president, Muslim Brotherhood leader Mohamed Morsi, after one year at the political helm stemmed from a series of mistakes: the Brotherhood's decision to run for the presidency, in contrast with early declarations that it would settle for partial control of parliament; the choice of an uncharismatic candidate, Morsi, instead of more moderate and attractive candidates; Morsi's hasty decision to assume dictatorial powers; the violence that the Brotherhood employed against its political opponents; and failed economic management of the country by the movement.

These explanations constitute an answer to the movement's narrative, which blames the Egyptian army for conspiring against a democratically elected government. Obaid assigns primary responsibility to the Muslim Brotherhood for its downfall, as it undermined the democratic process through which it took power, and saw it as a one-time and one-way occurrence. The author does not deny the role of the Egyptian army in overthrowing the Brotherhood, but emphasizes the widespread popular backing that it received. He contends that the Brotherhood aroused anxiety among broad circles in and outside of Egypt due to its intentions to work toward Islamization of

the country, and thus quickly lost its public support base. In this way it wasted the historic opportunity given to it to become a legitimate political actor, and encouraged the Egyptian army to join forces with other social and political elements to bring about the end of its rule.

Less convincing is the argument that as a result of its failure, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt turned to violence against symbols of the regime such as soldiers, clerics, politicians, and judges. Obaid mentions terrorist attacks that were indeed carried out in the previous decade by terrorist organizations such as Hasm and the Sinai Province, which pledged allegiance to the Islamic State. The Muslim Brotherhood and these organizations are presented in Obaid's book as of the same ilk (pp. 50-73), even though there is more than a reasonable doubt regarding the affiliation of the latter organizations with the mainstream of the movement and its leadership. Nor does Obaid point out that since Morsi's overthrow, the Brotherhood in Egypt has been split between conservatives and revolutionaries, between the older and the younger generations, and between exiled activists and the few active within the country. In addition, the exiled activists are divided between those associated with Qatar and those associated with Turkey, while the activists inside Egypt are divided between those who advocate the use of violence and those who strive for reconciliation with the regime in return for releasing the movement's imprisoned members (Ahmed, 2019; Ranko & Yaghi, 2019).

The chapters dedicated to the Muslim Brotherhood's branches in North Africa, the Levant, and the Gulf echo the message that it is a global terrorist movement that cannot be integrated within the political game in any country, and that it is necessary to work toward its destruction as a political, social, and ideological force. Obaid's approach reflects the official line of countries such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Egypt, which describe the Brotherhood as a multi-tentacled octopus, even though in practice

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the organizational affiliation among the parent movement's offshoots is loose, if at all existent. The relatively successful integration of the Ennahda party in the political system in Tunisia does not lead Obaid to rethink his previous assessment; instead he explains it as the party withdrawing from its principles and freeing itself from the negative influence of the parent movement (pp. 31-41).

Israeli readers may find special interest in the short but useful surveys offered in the book on the movement's less well-known branches in the four countries that signed recent agreements with Israel—the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco. The book was published before this development, so it does not relate to it. However, Islamist forces were and still are the spearhead of opposition in the Arab world to peace and normalization agreements with Israel. Consequently, their standing in each country is an important variable that affects the ability of Arab regimes to provide these agreements with broad public legitimacy and to instill them with positive economic, cultural, scientific, and other public content.

One insight that the reader gains from the book is that the quick progress of normalization between Israel and the United Arab Emirates is connected to a certain extent to Abu Dhabi's success in eradicating the al-Islah association—the local branch of the Muslim Brotherhood that was active in the country from 1974 to 2014. After the September 11 attacks, which included two terrorists originating in the UAE, the authorities ordered the dismissal of educators and government officials identified with the association. This heavy-handedness increased

with the beginning of the Arab Spring, when the association's call for elections was answered by a decision to dismantle it, revoke the citizenship of some of its leaders, and expel dozens of activists. In 2014, after several members of al-Islah turned to violence, the United Arab Emirates declared the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization. Furthermore, the UAE sent billions of dollars of financial aid to the Egyptian regime, and later to the Sudanese regime that came to power in 2019 following the resignation of Omar al-Bashir, in order to help them curb the Islamist threat far from its borders, before it could directly threaten its stability (pp. 44, 104-107).

While the Muslim Brotherhood has no physical legal presence today in the UAE that can protest against peace with Israel, the situation in Bahrain and Morocco is more complex. As the book shows, political parties identified with political Islam are active in both of these countries, but recognize the authority of the regimes and have restrained their criticism of the rulers. As a country with a Shiite majority, the Bahraini regime has cultivated the Sunni Islamist al-Menbar party as a counterweight to the pro-Iranian Shiite opposition. This proved itself when Shiite protests broke out in Manama early in the Arab Spring, and al-Menbar sided with the regime. The party makes sure to differentiate itself from the Muslim Brotherhood movement in order to ensure its continued activity, but nonetheless, since 2014 the regime has increasingly restricted its power in the government and parliament (pp. 100-101).

The Justice and Development Party, which is affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, has been active in Morocco since 1994. It focuses on social and economic reforms and distances itself from controversial religious issues, in order not to clash with the royal family or to harm its ability to cooperate with other political forces in the kingdom. From the beginning of the Arab Spring, the King of Morocco, Mohamed VI, granted greater political space for Islamist

forces, in an attempt to prevent protests. The party rewarded him by not participating in the demonstrations that broke out in February 2011. The recognition of the monarchic order paid off for the party in the November 2011 elections, which for the first time led to the appointment of a prime minister from its ranks—a position that it holds to this day. Obaid believes that the successful integration of the Justice and Development Party in Moroccan politics is the result of its departure from its radical principles, and does not tell us about the ability of the Muslim Brotherhood in general to become a legitimate political player: "Due to its accommodationist posture toward the monarchy and strict renunciations of Islamist positions, it has been largely discredited as a Muslim Brotherhood group" (pp. 27-30).

Finally, it is worth considering the book's main argument, that the Muslim Brotherhood is a failed movement. In historical perspective, there is indeed a gap between the broad popularity that the Brotherhood and its parties enjoy in the Arab world and the meager ability they have demonstrated to translate this into political power. However, history also shows us the movement's durability and the great appeal of its ideas. In Arab countries in which there are free and pluralist elections, Islamist parties still score substantial achievements. In addition, the fervor with which the book preaches against the movement strengthens the impression that the struggle over its standing in the Arab world hasn't yet been decided. In the concluding chapter, Obaid writes that the story of the Muslim Brotherhood ended tragically despite its original good intentions (p. 243). This is to a large extent the story of his book, which eulogizes it too early.

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Dr. Ofir Winter is a research fellow at INSS, specializing in Egypt, and a lecturer at the Department of Arabic and Islamic Studies at Tel Aviv

University. He is the co-author of *Zionism in Arab Discourses*, and the author of several articles on the politics of Egypt, the Arab-Israeli conflict, church and state in the Arab world, and contemporary Muslim law. ofirw@inss.org.il

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