

The Muslim Brotherhood: The Arab Spring and Its Future Face

Beverley Milton-Edwards
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The Muslim Brotherhood is considered to be the most significant and effective Islamic revivalist organization; or, in the words of Milton-Edwards, “a complex, far-reaching, and dynamic expression of contemporary Islamism” (188). Started as a movement to resist or oppose the Westernization of Muslim society, particularly Egyptian society, it spread quite rapidly within and beyond Egypt, inspiring a huge number of Muslims in various parts of the Muslim world and achieving, thus, the status of a global movement. The history of the Muslim Brotherhood since its establishment is both deep and appealing, making think tanks, policy makers, scholars, and students debate and research its origins, complex transformation, and ideology. It has resulted in producing a vast amount of literature that sheds light on the Muslim Brotherhood’s worldview, objectives, and evolving strategy. In this regard, a fresh and a comprehensive analysis of the Muslim Brotherhood in the context of the Arab Spring and what followed after has been conducted by Beverley Milton-Edwards, a professor of Politics at Queen’s University Belfast.

Based on her extensive research experience and almost four-decades-long interest in the Muslim Brotherhood, the author explains the genesis, influence, and political future of the organization in the context of the watershed developments that Egypt witnessed since 2011. In the introduction, the author briefly shares details about her several meetings with Dr. Mahmoud Zahar (a senior Hamas leader), whose optimism and pessimism

largely reflected the current situation of Islamic movements in the Arab world. The main objective of the book is to understand the ideology and goals of the Muslim Brotherhood (both complex and evolving factors) in Egypt and abroad. Of course, the Muslim Brotherhood has been variously understood: to some, the organization is “a true force of moderation among Islamists” while to others this moderation is “a facade behind which lies a terroristic fundamentalist threat which could undermine global security agenda” (3).

The first chapter of the book provides the background to what led Hasan al-Banna to establish the Brotherhood in Egypt, and also discusses the shaping and spreading of its ideology by al-Banna, Sayyid Qutb, Hasan al-Hudaybi, and others. Initially the organization emerged as a religious reform movement that focused predominantly on education, preaching (*da'wa*), and charity works. However, in the context of what was happening in Egypt and other parts of the Muslim world, the organization witnessed a huge transformation in its preaching and practice, reflected in its strategy of combining social activism with political activism (16-22). The chapter explains that although the Muslim Brotherhood became a populist force that heralded a change within and beyond Egypt, its engagement with politics made its relationship with the Egyptian state highly volatile. In this regard, a major role was played by Sayyid Qutb, commonly known as a “leading radical Islamist ideologue influencing not only sections of the Muslim Brotherhood but also other radical Sunni jihadi movements” (23).

Since its founding, the organization has adopted strategies (varying with the changing Egyptian political climate) in order to accomplish its goals and bring about change in society. Following the January 2011 mass protests and its victory in the 2011-12 parliamentary and presidential elections, the organization was provided an unprecedented opportunity to govern. The second chapter of the book accounts for its sudden rise and sudden fall in Egypt, followed by the author's insights into its trajectory and future prospects, comparing its earlier modes of survival with the present and highlighting the multiple challenges it faces. Milton-Edwards clearly argues that it is impossible to completely eradicate the organization, for it is “deeply embedded into Egypt's Islamic and Islamized culture” (52). It is also true that since 2011, the organization has tasted both the best and worst times of its history (54).

The impact of the Muslim Brotherhood on neighboring countries remains massive. Even though many Islamic movements in various parts of the Arab world (e.g., Ennahda in Tunisia) are indigenous and have evolved

in their specific local context, thereby maintaining their particular (national) identity, in the broader context all of them derived inspiration mostly from the Muslim Brotherhood. For instance, Hamas, founded in 1987, is proud to call itself a wing of the Muslim Brotherhood in Palestine (61, 67). Devoted to particular case studies, chapters three to six examine and explore the origin, later transformation, opportunities, challenges, and future face of Islamic movements in Palestine, Jordan, Tunisia, and Yemen. These chapters draw comparisons between sister groups' engagement with local politics, the enduring bond with the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, and consequences on these organizations of the Brotherhood's rise and fall. These chapters also accentuate that these movements in many respects were sharply at variance with the Muslim Brotherhood organization.

While tracing the roots of Hamas in Palestine and exploring its priorities, diplomatic relations, and strategy (especially viz. Israel and Egypt), the author highlights the role and enduring impact of Sheikh Izz ad-Din al-Qassam (a Syrian-born preacher and a paradigmatic figure for Hamas) on Palestinian politics. According to the author, unlike other Palestinian national leaders, he represented "only the spirit of Salafi Islam and a message of jihad" and "epitomized a new form of Islamism" in Palestine and beyond (65). Despite its precarious situation and daunting challenges, the author writes that Hamas is a movement that does not give up (82).

Considered throughout its history as a 'loyal opposition', the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood had until recently maintained a composed or symbiotic relationship with the Hashemite monarchy, in that its ideology and outlook presented no visible threat to the monarchy—and vice versa (89-92). The fourth chapter of the book considers the emergence of the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood, its sociopolitical goals and the internal power struggle between its dovish and hawkish elements, its passive-aggressive bond with the Jordanian state, its relationship with Hamas, and the impact of the Arab Spring and subsequent developments.

Drawing on the history of post-independence Tunisia, chapter five provides an account of Ennahda from its birth to its effective disappearance and then powerful reappearance in 2011, and the transitions that followed afterwards. The chapter discusses the nature of Tunisian society, the relationship of Ennahda with Bourguiba and Ben Ali, Rashid Ghannouchi's debate on democracy, power sharing, and social justice, and Ennahda's participation in politics and power in the wake of Tunisian revolution. It ends by considering the future prospects of the organization.

In the sixth chapter, Milton-Edwards analyzes the sister organization of the Muslim Brotherhood in Yemen, describing the nature of its role and activity in the country's complex and sensitive political setting—especially in the wake of Arab Spring and the Houthi challenge. More importantly, the chapter explains how the Islah Party throughout its history worked to maintain tribal balances, alliances with other opposition parties, cooperation with the Salih regime, participation in elections, and reducing internal tensions within the organization.

The final chapter of the book offers an excellent analysis of the global project of the Muslim Brotherhood and its efforts to realize this project, especially against the strategic and security concerns of Western governments. The book ends with a fine Epilogue that highlights how and why the Muslim Brotherhood failed to translate its agenda while governing Egypt and how this failure turned a strong tide against it.

The inclusion of a separate chapter on the policy and attitudes of some powerful Muslim and Western governments towards the Muslim Brotherhood in the aftermath of the Arab Spring would have perhaps illuminated yet another crucial aspect of the study. As it stands, the book centers the Muslim Brotherhood and its sister organizations in order to debate and discuss key issues such as democracy, *Sharia*, reform, radicalism, and pan-Islamism, particularly in relation to Palestinian issue and Israel. It offers a rich, informative, and more importantly fresh history of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and other neighboring countries through a carefully drawn assessment. Attempting to uncover the various transformations and future face of the Muslim Brotherhood, the book is a valuable contribution to understanding Islamic revivalism. It will be a vital reference for all those interested in understanding the nature of power, politics, and reform in the Arab world.

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