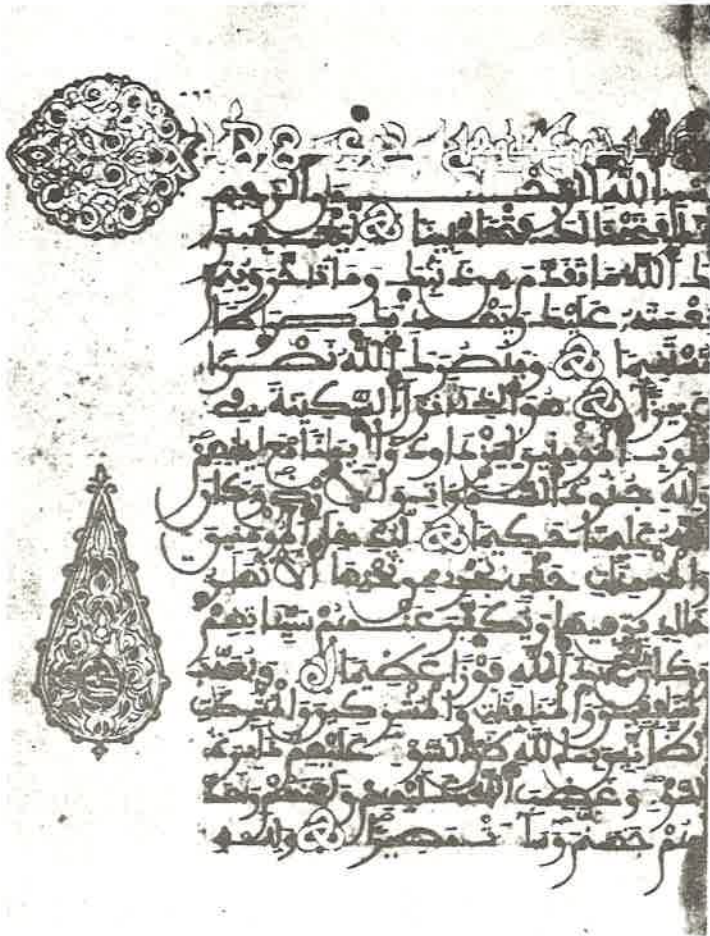


MILITANT ISLAM : THE MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD

S Y N O P S I S

The Muslim Brotherhood is a militant Islamic fundamentalist organization that is active in North Africa and other Islamic regions. It was founded by Hassan al-Banna and six companions, in Ismailia, Egypt, in 1928. Banna closely controlled the Brotherhood until his assassination, by police agents, in 1949. This paper basically concerns the two decades during which Banna led the organization. During those years the Brotherhood grew from a small Islamic fundamentalist group, to a religio-political force of 500,000 members. It possessed a clandestine guerrilla arm which was used against considered enemies of the Brotherhood, and a youth movement of 40,000 members, which was essentially a military force. Not surprisingly, the Egyptian Government became increasingly concerned about the potential political threat posed by the Brotherhood; particularly in the wake of a series of bombings and assassinations during the 1945-1948 period. Thus the government attempted to crush the organization. Though severely impaired, the Brotherhood managed to survive.

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## Introduction

Islamic fundamentalist political organizations have become major forces in the Islamic world in recent years. The Muslim Brotherhood was an important precursor of this trend. The Brotherhood became a major religio-political force in Egypt during the 1930's and 1940's, and despite various attempts to crush it, has remained an active, if covert organization in Egypt and in other Islamic countries. This paper examines various aspects of the Brotherhood; from the period of its inception, up to the late 1940's when the Egyptian Government first attempted to crush the organization.

The Muslim Brotherhood was founded in 1928, by Hassan al-Banna. In its early years it acted primarily as a fundamentalist organization which called for the reinstatement of Koranic laws, customs and social practices. It also preached against the evils of westernization. During its first two decades the organization greatly expanded its membership and extended its activities into such areas as business enterprises, and health, welfare and education services. Coincidentally, it progressively became involved in the political sphere.

## Al-Banna and the Brotherhood

Hassan al-Banna was born in 1906 in a village in Northern Egypt. His father, who had been educated at Cairo's historic Islamic university al-Azhar, was a religious leader in his local community. Moreover, he was the author of several works on the Hadith (renowned sayings or actions of the prophet, which form one of four roots of Islamic law). Hassan, in keeping with his father's religious influence, developed a strong interest in Islam from an early age. He joined a number of religious societies while still young. For example, when he was twelve he became a member of the Society of Moral Behaviour, which inculcated its members with ideals of Islamic morality. In 1919 when Hassan was thirteen he joined a Sufi religious organization; Sufism being an intense, mystical form of Islam. A number of subsequent Muslim fundamentalist leaders have similarly been associated with Sufism. It is noteworthy that also in 1919, soon after the end of the First World War, Banna was active in violent demonstrations against the continued British occupation of Egypt. Reflecting on this period, he wrote some years later: "Despite my preoccupation with Sufism and worship I believed that my duty to my country is an inescapable obligation - a holy way."<sup>1</sup>

Britain had been the occupying power in Egypt since 1882. As the First World War came to a close in November 1918, nationalists began a strong campaign to gain Egyptian independence from Britain. A group of nationalists, led by Saad Zaghlul, who was the leader of the newly formed Wafd Political Party, met with the British High Commissioner two days after the Armistice. In keeping with President Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points the nationalist delegation demanded self-determination for Egypt. Rejection of this demand led to a wave of nationalist led demonstrations and violence in various parts of Egypt. Subsequently, in 1922, Britain unilaterally granted Egypt

partial independence.<sup>2</sup> By the terms of this policy Britain was to maintain military bases in the Canal Zone in order to protect the strategically important Suez Canal, and was to maintain military units in Cairo to protect the source of the Canal Zone's fresh water supply. In addition, Britain was responsible for the defence of Egypt, from external aggression.

Banna completed his formal education at the Dar al-Ulum Teacher's College in Cairo, 1924-1927. The following passage from his memoirs, concerning his student years in Cairo, illustrates his profound concern for what he perceived to be the decadent state of contemporary Islam, and the destructive nature of western influences.<sup>3</sup>

After the last war and during this period which I spent in Cairo, there was an increase in spiritual and ideological disintegration, in the name of intellectual freedom. There was also a deterioration of behaviour, morals and deeds, in the name of individual freedom .... Books, newspapers, and magazines appeared whose only aim was to weaken or destroy the influence of any religion on the masses .... I saw that the social life of the beloved Egyptian nation was oscillating between her dear and precious Islamism .... and this severe Western invasion which is armed and equipped with all the destructive and degenerative influence of money, wealth, prestige, ostentation, material enjoyment, power, and means of propaganda .... I remember that I was so disturbed about the threat to Islam posed by the West that I spent about half the month of Ramadan of that year in a state of great anxiety and sleeplessness.<sup>4</sup>

While at Dar al-Ulum Banna organized a student religious group, whose members preached fundamental Islam in public places throughout Cairo.

Banna graduated from Dar al-Ulum in 1927 and took up a teaching position in Ismailia, the most Europeanized of all Egyptian towns, and a key centre of western power. The Anglo-French Suez Canal Company's headquarters was located in Ismailia, as was the headquarters of the Canal Zone British military forces. Banna harboured intense antipathies for both the Canal Company and the British occupation forces. He described Ismailia as follows:

On the west was the British camp with its power, authority and wealth stirring up sorrow and regret in every zealous patriot .... the Suez Canal Company having authority and influence, mistreated Egyptian employees, but was generous to foreign employees .... Even the mosque street was written thus, "Rue de la Mosquee ...."<sup>5</sup>

The Muslim Brotherhood (the Society of Muslim Brothers) was founded in Ismailia, in March 1928, by Hassan al-Banna and six companions. Banna, who is said to have possessed a charismatic personality, became the leader of the organization, adopting the title Supreme Guide. From this position Banna maintained a tight control of the organization for the next twenty years. Though founded by a group



of laymen, the Brotherhood initially functioned solely as a religious group; its members swore to be "... troops for the message of Islam."<sup>6</sup> Their basic message was simple: the Koran is our constitution and the Prophet is our leader. As the organization developed, branches were established in the general vicinity of Ismailia.

In 1932 it was decided to move the Brotherhood's headquarters to Cairo, Egypt's largest city. Banna also moved to Cairo, and continued to work as a teacher. As had been the practice in Ismailia, Banna and other Brethren spent much of their spare time spreading the organization's religious ideology in mosques, coffee-houses, meeting halls and other public locations. Moreover, when possible they made preaching forays into rural areas. Though the Brotherhood always remained an urban controlled organization, Banna strongly favoured peasant membership, since he saw the peasantry as being the least westernized sector of Egyptian society.

#### Growth and Structure

The Brotherhood experienced rapid growth during the 1930's - 1940's period, attracting members from virtually all areas of Egyptian Society. The following figures concerning Brotherhood branches in Egypt, provide a clear indication of this growth: 1930, 5 branches, 1931, 10 branches, 1932, 15 branches, 1938, 300 branches, 1940, 500 branches, 1949, 2,000 branches. It has been estimated that by 1948 there were approximately 500,000 Brotherhood members (this is historian Richard Mitchell's estimate, some other estimates have been considerably higher).<sup>7</sup>

The Brotherhood gained nationwide publicity in the 1936 - 1939 period when it carried out a campaign in support of the Palestinian Arabs, and against Jewish settlement in Palestine and the British occupation of that country. The large-scale campaign included fund raising. Money collected by the Brethren was sent to Palestinian leaders to help them sustain resistance against the Jews and the British.

It is difficult to assess the Brotherhood's activities during the Second World War, since the very heavy British military presence in Egypt during this period caused the organization to carry out various of its activities covertly. Moreover, in the wake of German successes in the Western Desert and the possibility of a German armoured thrust into the Nile Valley region, Hassan al-Banna was interned during the 1941 - 1942 period, as a war emergency measure. Nonetheless, the Brotherhood remained intact and continued to grow.

The Brotherhood was controlled by an urban centred leadership, though at least half of its membership lived in rural areas. The governing body, the Guidance Council, which was controlled and chaired by Banna, consisted of 12 members. Brotherhood regulations specified that at least 9 members of the Guidance Council had to reside in Cairo. It was revealed in 1954, when key members of the Brotherhood were tried for the attempted assassination of President Nasser, that

the Guidance Council of that period comprised of: an al-Azhar professor, two preachers, four senior civil servants, two lawyers, a pharmacist and a university professor. Subordinate to the Consultative Assembly, with 150 members, which was supposed to reflect the opinions of the general membership. Banna was also chairman of this body.

In addition there was a network of regional, district and local organizations. Moreover, the rank and file of the Brotherhood were organized into so-called families. There were five members to each family (the family system was introduced in the forties to avoid communication and organization problems experienced with larger groups). Four families constituted a clan, five clans made up a group, and five groups formed a battalion. There were frequent meetings, and there was considerable communication within and between the various levels of the organization.

The Brotherhood's main clandestine guerrilla force, known as the Secret Apparatus, was formed in 1943. It was claimed to be an instrument for the defence of Islam and the Brotherhood. In the post-war period it was responsible for numerous bombings and assassinations. It is notable that agents of the Secret Apparatus infiltrated the Egyptian communist movement, which the Brotherhood regarded as its principal political enemy. Secret Apparatus agents also gathered information on such bodies as the Egyptian armed forces, the British occupation forces, government offices and so forth.

During the post-war period, 1945 - 1948, the Brotherhood was the major extra-political organization in Egypt. It was during this period that the Secret Apparatus became most active. Among its assassination victims were Prime Minister Mahmud Nurgashi (discussed in more detail later in this paper), the Cairo Chief of Police, General Salim Zaki, the President of the Cairo Court of Appeals, and the Waqfist Minister of Finance - Amin Osman. Several attempts were made on the life of the leader of the Waqf Party, Nahas Pasha. Also various courthouses and residences of political leaders, as well as British installations, were bombed.

The social diversity of the Brotherhood's activists was indicated in a Government list of wanted Muslim Brothers, distributed during 1954. There were three lawyers, three army officers, one police officer, twelve civil servants, thirteen teachers, one doctor, nine labourers, two carpenters, thirty-eight students, one soldier, five clerks, eight white collar workers, fifteen al-Azhar students, one doorman, one accountant, one mechanic, one journalist, one farmer and twelve unemployed.

Each Brotherhood branch was required to have a troop of Rovers. The Rovers was ostensibly a quasi-boy scout organization, but in reality was a para-military force. It was intended to provide a military nucleus for the mobilization of the total membership, should the Society need to defend itself. There were an estimated 40,000 Rovers in 1949.<sup>8</sup>



### Involvement in the Socio-Economic Sphere

The Brotherhood's entry into the social, economic and workers' rights fields, provided the organization with considerable publicity and helped to boost the organization's image to prospective members. The organization began its role as a defender of workers' rights as early as 1932, when it became embroiled in a potentially explosive dispute in Ismailia, between the Suez Canal Company and Egyptian workers. An example of numerous similar cases involved an English phosphate company. The Brotherhood charged the company with maintaining poor working conditions underground, and with inadequate salaries, housing, prayer facilities and rest and leisure facilities. Foreign companies, but particularly the Canal Company, were closely watched by Brotherhood members for infractions of employment regulations and work agreements. Any allegations of infractions were lodged with the "offending" companies and with the Ministry of Social Affairs.

During the early nineteen-forties the Brotherhood established a labour department in its Cairo headquarters. Workers and unemployed were invited to gatherings there, where the Brotherhood's religious views as well as work problems were discussed. A committee was created in the labour department, whose job it was to lobby government and management officials. Close contact was maintained with government labour offices and with private industry in an effort to acquire jobs for unemployed members. Moreover, the labour section retained lawyers who specialized in labour affairs, and it had a labour school designed to instruct workers in their employment rights and to explain labour legislation.

The Brotherhood established some business enterprises in an endeavour to provide employment, generate capital and counteract Western control of Egyptian industry. The first of these was the Company of Islamic Transactions, which had an original modest capitalization of £E.4,000.<sup>15</sup> Further business ventures included the establishment of a number of small industries during the post-Second World War period. For example: the Company of the Muslim Brothers for Spinning and Weaving, which had an original capitalization of £E.8,000. All of the initial 60 employees were shareholders in the company. Other such ventures included: the Company for Commercial and Engineering Works, based in Alexandria, which produced construction materials, but also provided training for prospective construction workers; the Company of Commercial Agencies, based in Suez, which was involved in advertising and transportation, and the Muslim Brothers' Publishing Company, based in Cairo. The Brotherhood's business ventures were generally successful.<sup>16</sup>

During the early nineteen-forties, the Brotherhood instigated its own education system. Initially a number of free schools were established. These were principally aimed at combatting illiteracy, and fostering Islamic culture. Later the Society opened schools for the memorization of the Koran; night schools for teaching peasants to read; and it offered courses to coach students who had failed out of formal education programmes.<sup>17</sup>

Another of the major areas of the Brotherhood's social policies was the field of public health. Egypt had a vast public health problem. Rover groups disseminated knowledge of hygiene and medical care, and applied basic medical treatment. In 1944 a medical section was established at the Brotherhood's Cairo headquarters. Services were organized whereby physicians within the movement provided medical treatment services for the needy. The Cairo Clinic is estimated to have treated 21,877 patients in 1945, and 29,039 in 1946. The Brotherhood also, during the post-war period, established dispensaries, clinics and hospitals, especially in rural areas. In 1948 it was claimed that there were 800 branches of the Brotherhood's Welfare Department.<sup>18</sup> Medical services were linked with the Welfare Department, which also distributed such items as food, clothing and soap to the needy.

The Brotherhood was constantly urging the government to reform the tax system, in order that national social services such as schools and hospitals could be greatly extended and improved. They also wanted a national insurance scheme to be inaugurated, and death duties to be imposed; they continually criticized the unequal distribution of wealth in Egypt.<sup>19</sup> A pamphlet circulated in 1948 clearly expressed the society's views on land reform. It called upon the Government to distribute farmland in accordance with the precepts of Muhammad, that is to say to forbid the leasing of land, and to deny any person the right to possess more land than he himself could cultivate. The remainder of the land was to be distributed free of charge to the landless peasants.<sup>20</sup>

### Hard Times

In 1948 the Brotherhood was at the height of its power. Midst a proliferation of nationalist movements, the Brotherhood was recognised as a leader of nationalist aspirations. Moreover, it had achieved a considerable level of public respect due to its involvement in the Palestine War of 1948 - 1949. A number of battalions of Brotherhood volunteers had fought bravely against the Israelis, amidst a general Arab debacle.

During 1948 the Egyptian Government became acutely concerned that the Brotherhood was intent on inciting revolution and seizing control of Egypt. Brotherhood members had been involved in numerous bombings and assassinations during the 1945 - 1948 period. Prime Minister Nuqrashi Pasha decided to take action. On December 3, 1948 he issued an order which officially dissolved the Brotherhood. As a result of this, numerous key members of the organization were arrested and its properties and finances were confiscated. Within approximately six months an estimated 4,000 Bretheren had been imprisoned. It is notable that Banna was not arrested.<sup>21</sup> He realised that this probably meant that he would be assassinated.

On December 28, 1948, Prime Minister Nuqrashi was killed by a member of the Secret Apparatus. Banna had initially sanctioned the assassination, but then had second thoughts about the consequences of such an action; thus he had countermanded his original decision.



However, this was either ignored by the Apparatus, or was received too late to be effective.<sup>22</sup>

Banna was assassinated, on a Cairo street, on February 12, 1949. The assassin was a police officer who was the leader of a three-man police unit, specially formed to eliminate Banna.<sup>23</sup>

The trial against the Brotherhood began on December 2, 1950. Thirty-two Brethren, who essentially represented the whole organization, were placed on trial (Nagrasht's assassin had already been tried, and was executed on 23 April 1950). They were basically charged with having conspired against the existing order. A charge they categorically denied.

The lawyers for the Brotherhood presented a well prepared defence. For example, they protested that the Government had misconstrued the reasons why Brethren underwent military training, and the fact that the Brotherhood possessed large quantities of weapons. They claimed that the Brotherhood had only been interested in defending Egypt, Arabism and Islam against Britain and Zionism, and that when they used the term jihad (holy war) they only meant the defence of Islam against imperialism and disbelief.<sup>24</sup> A significant part of the defence's case was based on endeavouring to establish peaceful intentions of the Brotherhood, as evidenced by its social, educational, medical, welfare and spiritual services rendered to the community in the name of Islam.

The court's verdict was announced on March 17, 1951. Rather surprisingly the court found: "... a criminal conspiracy to overthrow the government, ... to be without foundation".<sup>25</sup> The judges essentially found that the Brotherhood's goals had been respectable; bearing in mind the continued British presence in Egypt, and expanding Zionist control of Palestine. They claimed that the Brotherhood could not be held responsible for the unbalanced actions of individual members in such stressful times. Thus the court dealt very leniently with the defendants. Five of them received three year prison sentences,<sup>26</sup> twelve got two years, while the remaining sixteen were acquitted.

In the meantime, the Brotherhood had begun to revive from the serious damage inflicted on it by government suppression. In December 1951, after further court proceedings, the Brotherhood regained its confiscated assets; this decision effectively restored the legal status of the Brotherhood. However, the organization was again officially dissolved in January 1954 by the Free Officers Revolutionary Government, which had come to power in July 1952, following the overthrow of King Farouk. Various members of the Free Officers movement had had close associations with the Brotherhood, and initially it had been permitted to operate relatively freely, despite the fact that all political parties had been banned. Nonetheless, President Nasser became increasingly concerned about the existence of the clandestine Secret Apparatus. Thus in January 1954 the Free Officers regime officially dissolved the Muslim Brotherhood. Subsequently, a member of the Brotherhood attempted to assassinate

President Nasser. This resulted in a harsh suppression of the Brotherhood. Six Brethren were executed and several received long prison sentences. However, the Brotherhood continued to survive as a covert organization.

### Conclusion

The Muslim Brotherhood's first two decades, 1928 - 1949, had witnessed the growth of the organization from a seven man Islamic fundamentalist organization, to a powerful, complex religious-political-economic organization of approximately 500,000 members, from virtually all levels of Egyptian society. Moreover, attached to the Brotherhood was a clandestine military arm. The Brotherhood had developed into a significant force, and posed a distinct threat to the Egyptian Government.

It is significant that when questioned about his political programme - assuming that he would one day achieve political office, Banna would claim that: "Our programme is the Koran," or "Our programme is Islamic government." If questioned further he would merely add: "When we achieve power we will consider what it is necessary to do in the light of existing circumstances. Until that time we are not going to be pinned down by details."<sup>27</sup> One might speculate whether or not Banna's Koran-centred political ideology would be adequate to deal with Egypt's multifarious socio-economic problems. In fact in the mid-1940's the Free Officers, who eventually seized political control of Egypt, had considered joining forces with the Brotherhood. However, they held back, since they believed that Banna lacked a realistic political programme for contemporary Egypt. For them, faith in the Koran was not enough.

In the wake of government action against the Brotherhood in the 1948 - 1949 period, many Brethren fled to other Islamic countries, helping to spread the Brotherhood's ideology outside of Egypt. Government oppression markedly impaired the Brotherhood within Egypt; nevertheless, a significant part of the organization went underground. The Brotherhood re-emerged in late 1951, having regained legal status through court action. However, it was again driven underground by President Nasser's regime, during 1954.

In closing it is apt to note that President Anwar Sadat, who among other things was "guiltily" of establishing peaceful relations between Egypt and Israel, was assassinated in 1981, by members of Takfir wal Hijra (Repentance and Fight from Sin), a militant clandestine organization associated with the Muslim Brotherhood.

## FOOTNOTES

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