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**Source:** greydynamics.com – A picture of al-Banna in a demonstration

***The Muslim Brotherhood: between religions and politics***

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On 4<sup>th</sup> March 2024, Egypt sentenced to death eight members of the Muslim Brotherhood for their role in the bloody violence of 2013, that followed the military's ouster of Mohamed Morsi, the country's first democratically elected president.

Those condemned to death by the Emergency Supreme Court of State Security sitting in Cairo, included the Brotherhood's supreme guide, Mohamad Badie. Badie was the eighth Supreme Guide of the Muslim Brotherhood and led the group between 2010 and 2013, when he was arrested during the army coup against the Morsi government.

The men were accused of conspiring to topple the government of Abdel Fattah el Sissi, the putsch spearhead. In July 2013, the leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood organised a massive sit-in in the Rabaa al Adawiya to denounce the coup. Security forces later raided the square and killed hundreds of people in a single day in what they termed a counter-terrorism operation. Morsi died in prison in 2019.

The Muslim Brotherhood represents the main Islamist organisation to have political parties or representatives in many Islamic countries from Morocco to Indonesia and offices in 92 countries, but at the same time, it is considered a terrorist organisation by the governments of Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

With the explosion of the Arab revolutions in 2011 that shook the political establishment of the countries of North Africa and the Middle East, the Brotherhood became the main political and social force in the process of transition from the autocracy of the *rais* towards a new "democratic" path. Although in Egypt and Tunisia, the leadership of the respective governments lasted a few years, the influence of the movement and its vision of political Islam are at the centre of attention of Western chancelleries as well as of the Islamic world itself.

The organisation, in Arabic "al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun" or simply "al-Ikhwan" (the Brothers), was founded in Egypt in 1928 by al-Ḥasan al-Banna, a disciple of the moderate Islamic brotherhood of the Sufis and teacher of Ismailia, a city north-west of Cairo along the Suez Canal, as a Sunni Islamic movement aimed at giving redemption to Arab workers and reacting against the secularisation of society.

The defeat of the Ottoman Empire in 1922 determined a great ideological crisis in the Islamic world, so al Banna's organisation, inspired by the great scholars of Islamic modernism, gave great hope to the Egyptian people and to many Muslims in the world. Although the first goal for the Muslim Brotherhood was to liberate Egypt from the British, at the same time they tried to realise the long-term goal, spreading the message of Islam through concepts such as *dawa*, or proselytism. The organisation expanded exponentially, going from 5 offices in 1930 to 300 offices in 1938 where 150.000 members joined.

Today as yesterday, social justice and the elimination of poverty represent the main pillars of the movement, as well as the concept of *jabiliyya* (ignorance, in Arabic) or the term with which Muslims indicate the period preceding the mission of the prophet Muhammad in VII century.

The ideologue of the Brotherhood, Sayyid Qutb, used the term *jabiliyya* in a modern way and developed it in what represents his main doctrinal work, a book on political Islam entitled

“Milestones”. In his work, written during his first detention on charges of attempted murder against President Gamal Nasser in 1954, he openly criticises all societies of the time including Islamic ones for being “pre-Islamic”, or belonging to the so-called jahiliyya, because contaminated by the germs of modernisation and secularisation. Released in 1964 following a general amnesty, he was arrested again the following year for a second attempt to kill President Nasser. The trial against him received strong media coverage and ended with him being sentenced to death by hanging together with six other members of the Brotherhood.

Qutb represents the most radical vision of the Muslim Brotherhood and his thought gave rise to an Islamic ideological and political variant within the Brotherhood, called Qutbism, in which great importance is given to the “offensive” jihad to eliminate the jahiliyya not only in the Islamic world. Due to these aspects of his thought, many scholars consider him the father of modern Islamic fundamentalism.

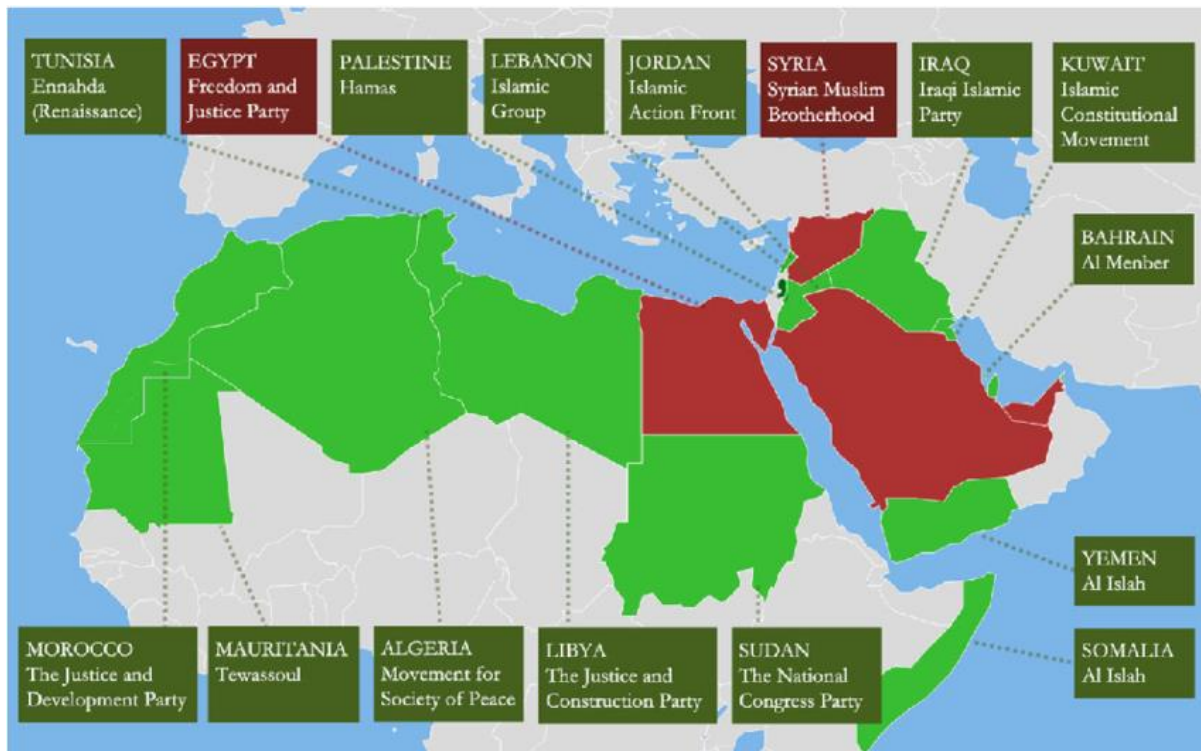
The vision of the world according to al Banna has always been coherent and determined, unlike Qutb who developed a more radical vision after his studies in the USA and his long period of imprisonment in Egypt. While al Banna preached pan-Islamism and did not oppose pan-Arabism and Egyptian nationalism, Qutb opposed both Arab nationalism and pan-Arabism as he believed that Islam alone was the driving force behind everything. These two visions also represent the main divisions within the organisation, that is, between conservatives closer to Qutb’s thought and reformists more linked to al Banna’s vision.

The Brotherhood is not a sect of Sunni Islam, but it can be defined as a sophisticated religious, social and political organisation with the aim of conveying an all-encompassing role for Islam in the lives of its members and in society based on their interpretation of the Quran and the Sunna. In the years of the organisation’s foundation, communism and fascism were expanding in Europe and, although seen as Western political forces hostile to Islam, some aspects of their policies were borrowed and adapted to an Islamic political language.

In the first decades of the organisation’s birth, there was a tacit agreement according to which the reformists would direct the Egyptian section of the Supreme Leader’s office while the conservative wing-maintained control of the movement’s organisation. After the closure of this body, the reformists dedicated themselves to political activism, running for office in the union and parliamentary elections. At the same time, this allowed the reformists to accumulate experience in administration, develop mediation skills and simultaneously present the image of the Brotherhood as a moderate Islam.

The main strength of the brotherhood, compared to other Islamic organisations, lies on the one hand, in the broad consensus that Islamism still receives among the humblest strata of the population, thanks also to the charitable activities they carry out; on the other, in the strong charisma of some of its members. Some scholars consider it the most pluralistic socio-political current in modern Arab history, since the most diverse groups of Muslims participate within it, in which no profession or social category is excluded, which differentiates it from other Islamic movements.

With the Arab Spring in 2011, the Brotherhood returns to the fore on the political scene of various Arab countries, Egypt first and foremost, but also Tunisia, Libya, Syria, Kuwait, Jordan and Morocco.



Source: Journal of Turkish Studies, 2022. Ikhwan-affiliated political parties (Hakkı Taş).

In Egypt, Hosni Mubarak's thirty-year rule fell under the riots of a mostly secular street, but it was with the country's first democratic elections in 2012 that the great organisational capacity of the Muslim Brotherhood emerged and the role of the various charitable activities linked to the movement in place of the country, capable of intercepting the consensus of the less well-off strata of society.

Turkey and Qatar are the two countries that have most supported and economically sponsored the growth of the Brotherhood in the post-Arab Spring political arena. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates fought them, fearful that their beliefs and influence in the Islamic world would undermine the foundations of their monarchies.

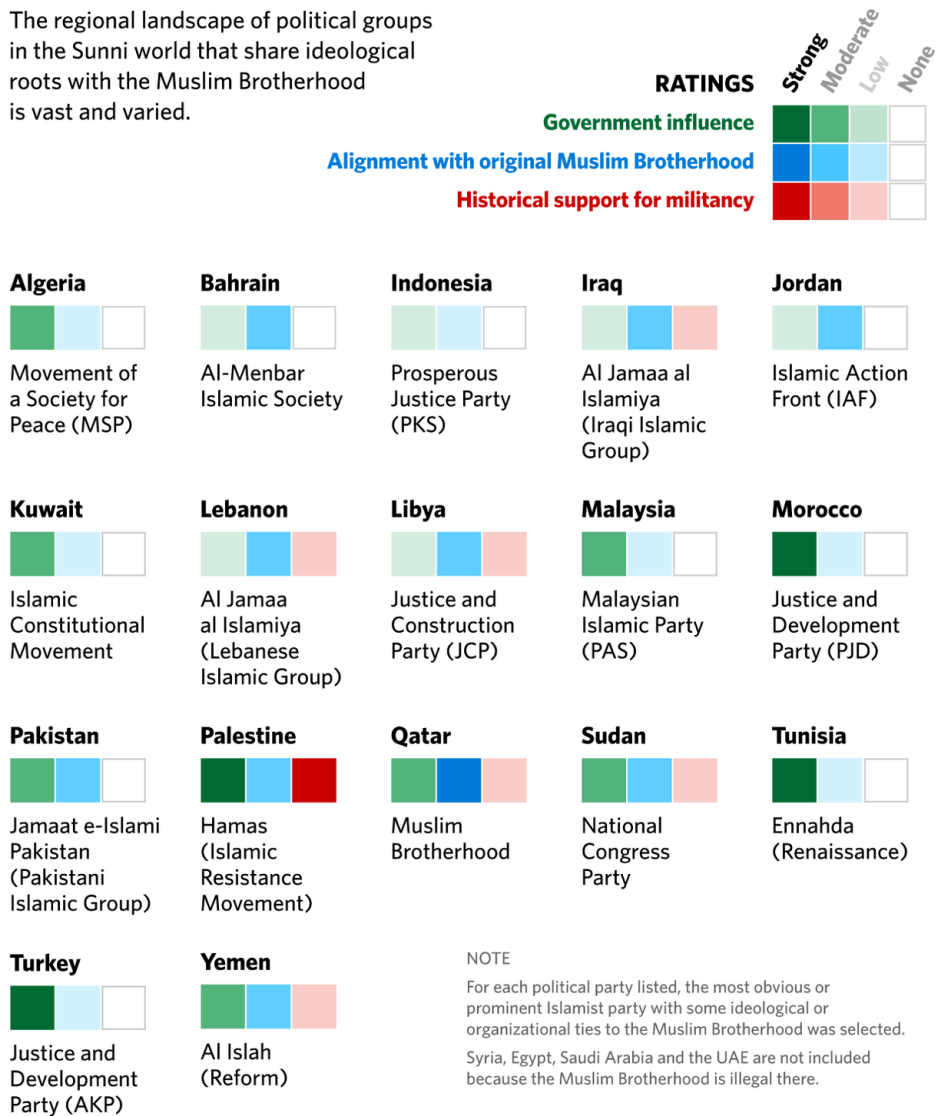
In 2012, the Muslim Brotherhood candidates involved in the electoral campaign for the political elections in Egypt made use of the help of consultants from the Turkish Justice and Development Party (AKP), taking advantage of the experience of the winning electoral campaign conducted by the then prime minister's party and current president of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Having achieved victory in the Egyptian presidential elections, the Muslim Brotherhood is leading a country for the first time. But after only a few months after the election, in 2012, the newly elected Egyptian President Muhammad Morsi began to concentrate power on himself, as well as his parliamentary immunity, so in July 2013 millions of demonstrators poured into the squares and streets of Cairo against government policies. The military institution poses as guarantors of stability and secularism but the situation degenerates between several supporters of President Morsi and the police. A real battle takes place in Cairo which leads to the death of over 2.500 people, while

around 16.000 Brotherhood activists are incarcerated, and President Morsi is deposed and imprisoned. Thus, the hegemonic project of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt comes to an end. But it is not the seizure of power by the military led by Abdal-Fatah al Sisi that wrecked the Brotherhood's governmental ambitions, but Morsi's obstinacy in not relinquishing power as requested by millions of Egyptians in the protests in Tahrir Square. He was succeeded by the current President, General Abdal-Fatah al Sisi who designated the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization. The Brotherhood has been in full turmoil since then, with the leadership in prison or abroad, the decentralisation of authority and the return to what is a constant in its political history, namely secrecy.

If Egypt remains the beating heart of the Brotherhood (still in the throngs of reorganisation), the rich petromonarchies of the Gulf and Turkey are the countries that most support them (Qatar and Turkey) and fight them (United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia).

# Rating Political Parties Affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood

The regional landscape of political groups in the Sunni world that share ideological roots with the Muslim Brotherhood is vast and varied.



## Factors considered in determining ratings

### Government importance

Number of seats in parliament or in government; historical importance; political influence; and social influence

### Alignment with original Muslim Brotherhood

Ideological and political ties that align with original 1928 Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood

### Historical support for militancy

Historical support for militant activity or militant arm of group

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Source: Stratfor, 2019

Since the start of the Arab Spring, the United Arab Emirates has waged a campaign against the local branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, known as the al-Islah Society, arresting hundreds of members of the group, before declaring the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organisation. Turkey, on the other hand, has become the sanctuary for those members of the Brotherhood fleeing from Egypt and the United Arab Emirates. Thousands of Egyptians who fled Egypt

following General al Sisi's putsch, fearing legal action against them, took refuge in Turkey where they found protection. Ankara has long used its pro-Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas position as an instrument of soft power in the region also to convey a conservative vision in domestic politics. After the street protests in Egypt against Morsi, Turkey became a regional hub for the organisation of the Muslim Brotherhood. Istanbul hosted numerous meetings aimed at planning the role to play against the new Egyptian government. These events sponsored by Ankara represented Turkey's effort to delegitimise the then new Egyptian government and at the same time, with the support of the Brotherhood, it showed its face in the restoration of Islamic law seen by the Brotherhood as the basis for protecting the Umma (Community, in Arabic) Islamic.

Qatar is the other major sponsor of the Ikhwan and its television station "Al Jazeera" represents its most formidable media weapon in the world. Television programmes in Arabic such as "Sharia and Life", hosted by the spiritual leader of the Brotherhood, the Egyptian Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, were regularly seen in the past by millions of viewers around the world.

In the meantime, some Gestures of appeasement towards the Brotherhood have been manifested by the Gulf Monarchies.

Even Turkey, a strong supporter of the Brotherhood, after a period of isolation has decided to resume diplomatic ties with Arab states that opposed Ankara's pro-Brotherhood regional policies. The United Arab Emirates has also appointed an ambassador to Turkey. Tunisia, Libya and Morocco are the only Arab countries in which political parties linked to the Muslim Brotherhood have led the government and have not had dramatic outcomes as in Egypt.

Meanwhile, in the West, there is a debate about the political, social and religious nature of the Brotherhood, and its possible links with terrorism. In 2015 the British Parliament presented an in-depth study "On Political Islam and the Muslim Brotherhood" concluding that there are no links between the organisation and terrorist activities against and within the United Kingdom. The opaque and multifaceted characteristic of the organisation makes it versatile and capable of adapting to the different socio-political contexts in which it operates, and for this very reason, it is more difficult to decipher and understand the real objectives it wants to achieve within each state in which operates.