By Fateh Sami, Independent Researcher and Academic

2 November 2025

The Muslim Brotherhood Movement: Intellectual, Historical, and Geopolitical Analysis

Introduction

Islamism constitutes a broad spectrum of religious and political ideological tendencies advocating the integration of Islamic principles into political systems (Roy, 1994; Voll, 1994). Proponents maintain that Islam is inherently political and offers a comprehensive normative framework that, its adherents argue, can more effectively secure social justice, moral order, and political legitimacy than secular alternatives such as liberal democracy, communism, or capitalism (Esposito, 1998; Piscatori, 1983). Those who subscribe to this outlook—commonly referred to in Arabic as *al-Islamiyyun*—are frequently associated with Islamic institutions, social mobilization networks, or organized political groupings (Haddad & Esposito, 1998). Central to many Islamist currents is an emphasis on the implementation of *sharia* as a foundation for governance, the pursuit of transnational Muslim solidarity, and the establishment of states or public orders grounded in Islamic legitimacy (Mandaville, 2007).

Within this pluralistic ideological landscape, the Muslim Brotherhood (*al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun*), founded in Egypt by Hasan al-Banna in 1928, emerged as one of the most significant currents of political Islam in the modern era (Mitchell, 1969). While best understood as a distinct organizational current—combining religious revivalism with social welfare, educational initiatives, and political activism—the Brotherhood's doctrinal and tactical innovations were widely emulated across the Arab world and beyond, influencing the development of numerous other Islamist currents throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (Kepel, 2002).

Given its enduring ideological influence and geopolitical relevance, the Muslim Brotherhood provides an illuminating case for understanding the evolution of modern Islamism. The movement functioned not only as a religious and social initiative but also as a political and geopolitical actor, capable of exerting substantial influence across the region and beyond.

This study, therefore, aims to examine two primary dimensions of the Brotherhood:

1. Intellectual and ideological dimension: Analysing the discourse, principles, teachings, and ideological evolution of the movement.

2. Geopolitical dimension: Investigating the Brotherhood's interactions with foreign powers, regional states, and its role in broader strategic and political dynamics.

By integrating these two dimensions, the study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the Muslim Brotherhood's nature and functioning, elucidating the interrelationship between its ideological foundations and its regional political engagements.

Historical Background and Formation of the Movement

Following the collapse of the Ottoman Caliphate, the Arab world experienced a profound crisis of identity accompanied by a political vacuum (Cleveland & Bunton, 2016). Egypt, as a major intellectual and political centre of the Arab world, became a focal point for competition among secular, nationalist, and communist currents. During this period, a

widespread perception of the need for social reform and a return to Islamic teachings emerged, creating fertile ground for the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood (Mitchell, 1969).

Foundation by Hassan al-Banna

In 1928, Hassan al-Banna founded the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, with the primary objective of establishing an Islamic society grounded in *sharia*, moral principles, social justice, and ethical cohesion. The ideological framework of the movement rested on three fundamental pillars:

1. Tawhid and Ummah-centeredness: Viewing Islam as a comprehensive system encompassing all aspects of life.

2. Individual and social reform: Pursuing efforts to eradicate corruption and injustice within society.

3. Struggle against oppression and corruption: Engaging actively in both social and political spheres to challenge injustice.

This foundational period established the Muslim Brotherhood as a movement that combined religious revivalism with social activism and political engagement, setting the stage for its subsequent influence across Egypt and the wider Arab world.

Intellectual and Ideological Dimension

Core Principles and Founder's Philosophy

The Muslim Brotherhood was founded on classical Islamic teachings, integrated with Hassan al-Banna's reformist interpretations (Mitchell, 1969). The movement sought to present Islam as a comprehensive social and political system, emphasizing the importance of individual morality, social responsibility, and societal reform. Al-Banna's vision framed Islam not merely as a spiritual or ritual practice but as a guiding framework for all aspects of public and private life (Esposito, 1998).

Organizational Structure and Internal Cohesion

The Brotherhood maintained a structured hierarchy and codified internal regulations, ensuring the consistent dissemination of its teachings and fostering a shared sense of identity among members (Wickham, 2002). This organizational framework enabled the movement to:

• Conduct extensive educational and cultural activities.

• Establish local and regional networks.

• Expand its social and political influence across Egypt and later, the broader Arab world.

Engagement with Secularism and Nationalism

In confronting secular and nationalist currents, the Muslim Brotherhood offered sustained critiques, emphasizing that a return to Islamic principles could address the crises of identity, social disintegration, and moral corruption (Esposito, 1998). These intellectual interventions contributed significantly to the emergence of modern political Islam, and the Brotherhood's model became influential for subsequent Islamic movements across the region (Esposito, 1998).

Evolution after Migration

Following the 1950s crackdowns under Gamal Abdel Nasser, Brotherhood leaders migrated to the Gulf countries and North Africa (Kepel, 2002). There, they established extensive networks of schools, cultural associations, and educational centres, enabling the dissemination of the movement's ideological and social teachings. This transnational expansion transformed the Brotherhood into a model of political Islam beyond Egypt, enhancing its capacity to influence regional politics and shaping the organizational strategies of other Islamist movements (Kepel, 2002).

Internal Critiques and Challenges

Despite its intellectual coherence and organizational strength, the Brotherhood faced several internal and ideological challenges, including:

• Tensions between ethical ideals and political pragmatism.

• Emphasis on religious identity with limited flexibility in response to social change.

• The potential instrumentalization of religious teachings for political objectives.

Comparison with Other Islamic Currents

The Muslim Brotherhood occupies a distinct position among Islamic currents such as Wahhabism, Salafism, and more militant networks including Al-Qaeda. While sharing a commitment to Islamic principles, the Brotherhood's emphasis on gradual social reform, organizational discipline, and political engagement distinguishes it from more rigid or militant currents (Roy, 1994), positioning it as a key reference point in the study of modern political Islam.

Geopolitical Dimension and Intellectual Lineage

Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Muhammad Abduh: Intellectual Background

Jamal al-Din al-Afghani

• Role: Islamic reformer and political activist operating in Iran, Egypt, and India (Hourani, 1983).

• Objectives: Counter Western colonial influence, raise political and social consciousness among Muslims, and promote Islamic unity (*pan-Islamism*) (Hourani, 1983).

• Tactics: Intellectual and educational engagement with Muslim communities through newspapers, public speeches, and discourse dissemination.

• Approach: Primarily intellectual and civil, distinct from mass mobilization or street-level organization.

Muhammad Abduh

• Role: Student of al-Afghani in Egypt; religious and social reformer (Voll, 1994).

• Objectives: Foster intellectual reform in Egyptian society, offer a modern interpretation of Islam, and cultivate a new generation of Muslims guided by rationalist and reformist principles.

• Tactics: Emphasized modern Qur'anic exegesis and the establishment of educational institutions to propagate reformist ideas.

Comparison with the Muslim Brotherhood

The intellectual legacies of al-Afghani and Abduh provided foundational ideas for Islamic reform, yet the Muslim Brotherhood translated these ideas into organizational, social, and political activism, distinguishing itself from earlier reformist thinkers who focused primarily on education and public persuasion rather than structured political organization (Hourani, 1983; Voll, 1994). This transformation underscores the Brotherhood's role as both an ideological and operational actor within modern political Islam.

Final Summary

This study demonstrates that the Muslim Brotherhood is not merely an intellectual or reformist movement but also an active participant in regional political and geopolitical spheres. Comparative analysis with other Islamic currents, alongside the intellectual heritage of Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Muhammad Abduh, highlights the movement's unique combination of intellectual, educational, and organizational dimensions, which distinguish it from extremist, militant, or purely religious currents (Roy, 1994; Kepel, 2002).

Furthermore, the influence of Deobandi schools and Hassan al-Banna's educational networks, particularly in training regional and transnational cadres, illustrates how the integration of religious teachings, organizational structures, and financial resources has been central to shaping contemporary Islamic movements (Wickham, 2002).

Ultimately, examining these movements through a **multi-dimensional lens—intellectual, educational, and geopolitical—**enables a deeper understanding of Islamic and national movements more broadly, demonstrating that independent and comparative analysis provides a clearer perspective on their objectives, tactics, and impact.

References

Cleveland, W.L. & Bunton, M., 2016. *A History of the Modern Middle East*. 6th ed. Boulder: Westview Press.

Esposito, J.L., 1998. *Islam and Politics*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.

Esposito, J.L., 1998. *Political Islam: Revolution, Radicalism, or Reform?* Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers.

Haddad, Y.Y. & Esposito, J.L., 1998. *Islam, Gender, and Social Change*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hourani, A., 1983. *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798–1939*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kepel, G., 2002. *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Mandaville, P., 2007. *Global Political Islam*. London: Routledge.

Mitchell, R.P., 1969. *The Society of the Muslim Brothers*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Piscatori, J., 1983. *Islam in a World of Nation-States*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Roy, O., 1994. *The Failure of Political Islam*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Voll, J.O., 1994. *Islam: Continuity and Change in the Modern World*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.

Wickham, C.R., 2002. *Mobilizing Islam: Religion, Activism, and Political Change in Egypt*. New York: Columbia University Press.