

# CHARITABLE ACTIVITIES OF THE MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD

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Despite its tradition of secretiveness, the Muslim Brotherhood, once highly influential, has been analyzed recently in several informative publications, some of which cover the more inclusive field of “political Islam.” One approach is to treat the brotherhood as a monolithic object of study, an implacable enemy of liberal democracies determined to impose Islamist values, even a restored Caliphate, on the West. Such analysts note the posthumous influence that the brotherhood’s “second founder,” Sayyid Qutb, executed by Nasser in 1966, exerted (albeit indirectly) on jihadist groups such as Al-Qa’ida. Other analysts however have emphasized the brotherhood’s many-sided and factional character, the current outcome of which is that surviving hard-line elders with Qutbist sympathies are challenged by a younger generation committed to nonviolence and disposed to cooperate with secular democrats. One country, Tunisia, established itself as the only authentic, albeit fragile, Arab democracy, when the Islamist party originating from the Muslim Brotherhood, Ennahda (“the renaissance”), embarked on a politics of pragmatic gradualism and cooperation with secular parties (Marks, 2017, pp. 32–37).

After the overthrow in Egypt in 2015 of Mohamad Mursi’s short presidency, and the brutal reprisals subsequently taken by President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi against the brotherhood, the movement is now at the lowest ebb in its history. It was founded in 1928 by Hassan al-Banna, a schoolteacher, with the aim of fortifying the Islamic character of Egyptian society, then under British occupation, but also more generally of standing up to Western domination of the Middle East after Arab lands were divided after World War I and the Ottoman Caliphate was dismantled. Opposition to Zionism has been a constant theme. Members of the brotherhood have experienced several periods of imprisonment

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DOI: 10.2979/muslphilcivisoc.2.2.01

and torture since its foundation and later after Egyptian independence in 1952, though at various times secular nationalists tolerated and even cultivated them (Gerges, 2018).

Some analysts (such as Frampton, 2018) assume that the motivation of the brotherhood has been entirely political in nature. Others (notably Kandil, 2015) treat it as a kind of millenarian sect. If the brotherhood in Egypt itself is hard to understand, its international branches form a kind of franchise operation whose mechanisms for maintaining a loose consistency are inscrutable to outsiders. External commentaries on the Muslim Brotherhood vary according to differences in the personal approach adopted. Several recent publications (Hamid & McCants, 2017 being an exception) barely touch on its voluntary welfare activities. As a student of philanthropic traditions, I shall try here to show the importance of this omission.

The brotherhood always maintained a studied ambiguity as to the weighting of religious, political, and welfarist elements in its aims, which are deemed in their distinctive worldview to form a comprehensive and seamless whole, the *shumūliyya* of Islam. “My brothers,” Al-Banna wrote in a message to his followers in Egypt six years before his assassination in 1948, “you are not a benevolent society, nor a political party, nor a local organization having limited purposes. Rather, you are a new soul in the heart of this nation to give it life by means of the Qur’an” (Mitchell, 1969, p. 30). One cannot ignore the strong presence of religious moralism, as well as political resistance and campaigning, in the biography of Al-Banna. He was initiated as a boy into a Sufi order and at the age of thirteen became secretary in Mahmudiyya (his home town some 90 miles northwest of Cairo) of the Hasafiyya Society for Charity (*al-jam`iyya al-khairiyya al-hasafiyya*), which he was later to look back on as the root and forerunner of the Muslim Brotherhood (Mitchell, 1969, p. 2). One of the priorities in the early years of the brotherhood was public health. It was active in cleaning up villages and responding to epidemics, and it also set up dispensaries, clinics, and hospitals throughout Egypt, though these were at various times closed down by the government. It founded educational institutions and small industrial enterprises. In 1945, it was required to split into two divisions: one concerned with politics and one with welfare and social services (Mitchell, 1969, pp. 36–37, 289–291).

The courtroom of history, since the rise of global jihadism, has put Sayyid Qutb in the dock. He held that the Qur’an contained all the necessary answers to the world’s problems; he recommended revolutionary violence, and anathematized all actually existing societies as forms of *jāhiliyya*, merely prolongations of the “time of ignorance”

held in traditional Islam to have existed in the Arab world before the divine revelation (Gerges, 2018, p. 249). By way of extenuation, it may be recalled that Qutb began his career as a secular *littérateur*, and the tone of his most radical publications was sharpened by years of imprisonment and torture. In less aggressive mode, he wrote with eloquence on the importance of *zakat*, “the outstanding social pillar of Islam.” *Zakat* was distinct from socialism, he argued, but also had nothing to do with “charity,” a non-Islamic concept (Mitchell, 1969, p. 253). This claim for the superiority of *zakat*—in that the needy are accorded a right (*haqq*) to material support from the well-off (cf. Qur’an 51:19), whereas “charitable” gifts are made at the whim of the donor—is often heard today from Muslim intellectuals. The leader of the Syrian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood between 1945 and 1961, Mustafa Al-Siba’i, took the view that Islam was compatible with socialism and that *zakat* was “a powerful factor for the diffusion of love and goodness between people” (Carré & Michaud, 1983, p. 87). An exhaustive study of how *zakat* payments should be calculated and distributed was published by Sheikh Yusuf Al-Qaradawi (Qaradawi, n.d.), widely regarded as the most influential spiritual guide of the Muslim Brotherhood, though he has never accepted a formal position as such.

An analogy has been drawn between local Islamist institutions such as mosque committees and the South American Christian “base communities,” marginalized groups who start by coping with small local issues and work their way up slowly to larger ones (Sullivan, 1992, pp. 8, 157–158). The Muslim Brothers’ theology, however, does not aim at liberating the poor but rather at establishing a broadly Islamic order. Their social programs have been characteristically paternalistic, supported by marginalized professionals as much as by poor people, with special attention given to professional associations and with a strong emphasis on service provision rather than galvanizing disadvantaged communities (Bayat, 2002, p. 13). Some scholars have argued that Islamist charitable structures in the Middle East, for instance in Jordan, have typically promoted horizontal networks among the middle classes rather than prioritizing the alleviation of poverty (Clark, 2003). For the Muslim Brothers of Egypt, political justice was arguably more important than social justice. In 2009 it was observed from a leftist standpoint that their leaders had benefited in recent years from the freedom to acquire wealth through economic links with the State and had little in common with the impoverished masses (Tammam & Haenni, 2009, pp. 5, 16). It must be added that since its origins the brotherhood has shown a tendency to scapegoat, and sometimes stir up serious violence against, the Coptic minority in Egypt (Meral, 2018, pp. 83–84, 88–89).

A historically balanced account of the charitable commitments of the Muslim Brothers has yet to be written. Without doubt, Islamist voluntary associations have shown themselves capable of delivering effective welfare and relief services in many contexts where the State has been unable or unwilling to provide them; and it is equally certain that they have often sought a political dividend. In Egypt, the Muslim Brothers played a leading role after a serious earthquake in Cairo in 1992, and again after flooding in southern Egypt in 1994. In February 2002, after a terrible railway accident at Al-Ayatt, 70 kilometers south of Cairo, the Brotherhood was reportedly banned by the Mubarak government from raising funds or organizing help for the victims (MacFarquhar, 2002). This was an early instance of the clash between, on the one hand, political and security priorities set by governments and, on the other hand, humanitarian imperatives. This clash was to become particularly dramatic in many other humanitarian crises, with adverse consequences for the victims of disasters and conflicts, when, as part of the “global war on terror,” the United States government strengthened its measures penalizing material support for terrorism. These measures claim in effect a worldwide jurisdiction and bear especially hard on Islamic charities deemed, justly or not, to have links with terrorism (ACLU, 2009; Benthall, 2016, 2017; Maxwell & Majid, 2016, pp. 46–48, 176–178).<sup>1</sup>

My own broad conclusion, based on published sources and on some firsthand observation in Algeria, Jordan, Britain, France, and the Palestinian Territories, is that it is a mistake to reduce the charitable and welfare activities of the Muslim Brotherhood and their affiliated organizations to mere political calculation. For Benoît Challand (2014), Islamic charities inspired by the Muslim Brotherhood are characterized by what he calls a “diffuse subjectivity”: at its core is the association of *zakat* with moral purification. But in the absence of hard evidence, agreement among commentators is unlikely. It may be agreed, however, that the Islamic symbolic repertoire—including *ṣadaqa*, *infāq*, and *waqf* as well as *zakat*—is highly pertinent to questions of social justice, voluntary giving, and volunteering that arise in Muslim-majority countries and in countries with Muslim minorities.

In an article in *Foreign Affairs* in 1996 that should have attracted wider attention at the time, Abdullahi Ahmed An-Naim set his face against the rising tide of Islamist militancy but reminded his readers that Islam “has intense spiritual and political appeal among Muslims who look to it for the organizing principles of their lives. It is difficult to

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<sup>1</sup> See also the Charity and Security Network, <https://www.charityandsecurity.org/>.

imagine predominantly Muslim societies abandoning their belief in an Islamic order as an ideal to be pursued, regardless of how elusive and problematic such an order may prove in real life.” Casting doubt on the realistic possibilities of secular politics in the Middle East region, An-Naim argued that the pressing political challenge was to try to capture the symbolic imagination of the same populations who are targeted by the militants. After over twenty years his message seems even more apposite. In particular, an increasing recognition of the importance of Islamic philanthropic and humanitarian traditions may be seen as an indispensable counterbalance to the pull of jihadi extremism, which is sure to remain attractive to some of those who have endured, and are enduring, unrelieved suffering and humiliation as a result of conflicts in the Greater Middle East.

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