

What You Need to Know About the Muslim Brotherhood

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Here's the basics on the group that has Glenn Beck going batshit.

As the revolutionary upsurge in Egypt builds toward its conclusion, some of the key questions involve the role of the Muslim Brotherhood—the Islamic movement that has been characterized as anything from a benign prodemocracy force to a terrorist-inclined radical group with designs on establishing a global Caliphate.

What, exactly, is the Brotherhood? How strong is it inside Egypt? If the regime falls, will the Brotherhood take over, or is Egypt too modern, too secular, and too diverse to tolerate an Islamist-dominated government? And finally, if the Brothers did seize power, either in the streets or through elections, what kind of rulers might they be? To answer these questions, we need some grounding in history.

Teachers, Players, Assassins, Spies

The group known formally as the Society of Muslim Brothers was founded in 1928 by Hassan al-Banna, who from the very start promoted the slogan: “The Koran is our constitution.” Banna, a teacher, described this as “a Salafiyya message,” meaning that the Brothers intended to restore Islam to the alleged purity of its earliest days. They adhered to an ultra-orthodox view of Islam, and in the 1930s Banna established the Secret Apparatus, an underground intelligence and paramilitary arm with a terrorist wing. The Brotherhood had enormous power behind the scenes in monarchical Egypt, playing politics at the highest level, often in league with King Farouk against his political opponents, including the left, the communists, and the nationalist Wafd Party. In 1937, at Farouk’s coronation, the Brotherhood—in Arabic, the Ikhwan—was enlisted to provide “order and security.”

For the next five decades, the Muslim Brotherhood would serve as a battering ram against nationalists and communists. Despite the Brothers’ Islam-based anti-imperialism, the group often ended up making common cause with the colonial British. It functioned as an intelligence agency, infiltrating left-wing and nationalist groups. But it was also fiercely independent, at times clashing violently with the ruling authorities. On several occasions, Ikhwan assassins murdered top Egyptian officials, including Prime Minister Mahmoud Fahmi al-Nuqrashi in 1948. (Brotherhood founder Banna was assassinated by agents of the regime just weeks later).

Revolution, Terrorism, and American Friends

In the 1950s, the Brothers initially coexisted with the revolutionary regime of Gamal Abdel Nasser, who toppled the king in 1952. Gradually, however, Nasser sidelined the group, and by 1954 Nasser and the Brotherhood were at war. Reverting to its terrorism days, the Brothers twice tried to assassinate Nasser. The Brotherhood’s vicious anti-Nasserism synced up conveniently with British and then American hatred for Nasser, and there’s evidence that London spies may have collaborated with the Brotherhood against Nasser.

By then, the group's chief international organizer and best-known official was Said Ramadan, the son-in-law of Hassan al-Banna. Ramadan had come to the attention of both the CIA and MI-6, the British intelligence service. In researching my book, *Devil's Game: How the United States Helped Unleash Fundamentalist Islam*, I came across an unusual photograph that showed Ramadan with President Eisenhower in the Oval Office. By then, or soon after, Ramadan had likely been recruited as a CIA agent. *Wall Street Journal* reporter Ian Johnson has since documented the close ties between Ramadan and various Western intelligence services in his book, *A Mosque in Munich*. In a recent article in the *New York Review of Books*, Johnson writes: "By the end of the decade, the CIA was overtly backing Ramadan." [1] On the run from Nasser, Ramadan—a peripatetic traveler who'd been the chief organizer of the Muslim Brotherhood's chapters in Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, and Pakistan—settled in Geneva, Switzerland, where he established an Islamic Center that for a quarter-century would serve as a hub for the Brotherhood's worldwide efforts.

Robert Dreyfuss

P.S.

* From AlterNet, February 12, 2011:

http://www.alternet.org/story/149893/what_is_the_muslim_brotherhood%2C_and_w

* Robert Dreyfuss is the author of "Devil's Game: How the United States Helped Unleash Fundamentalist Islam" (Henry Holt/Metropolitan Books).

Footnotes

[1] See on ESSF: [Washington's Secret History with the Muslim Brotherhood](#)