

Book Reviews

Alison Pargeter. *The Muslim Brotherhood: The Burden of Tradition*

London: Saqi, 2010. 300 pp. ISBN: 978-0863564758 (hbk). £20. Reviewed by Richard Phelps

The Muslim Brotherhood (al-Ikhwan al-Muslimin), founded in Egypt in 1928 by Hassan al-Banna, is a controversial organisation precisely due to its ambiguity. It is vocal, yet secretive; it is transnational and led by one 'General Guide', but has a different history in each country; it is said to be non-violent, but often endorses violence. The group seeks to contest elections, yet is far from internally democratic and would prefer to exclude Christians and women from being a country's president. Amid this incertitude, this highly lucid and approachable analysis of the Brotherhood offers a welcome degree of clarity. It is not another Egyptian-centric history of the movement; instead, Alison Pargeter (University of Cambridge) offers a more global picture of the trajectories the movement has taken in the Arab world and in Europe. Based on important internal documents, and - crucially - a remarkable array of on-the-record interviews with senior Brotherhood personnel, Pargeter allows the Brothers to do much of the talking.

The relationship between Syria and the Muslim Brotherhood, for example, captures many of the organisation's paradoxes. Unlike in Egypt, where the Brethren represent the deepest-rooted opposition to the regime and to its relationship with Israel, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood can hardly play the 'Palestine card' against a regime that for decades has been at war with Israel and championed the Palestinians' armed struggle. Nor do the Syrian Ikhwan represent an entrenched opposition to the Asad regime. Beyond the events that culminated in the regime's assault on the city of Hama in February 1982, the Brotherhood's history in Syria is little-known. Pargeter's chapter adds much to the scarce literature on the topic by examining the internal dynamics of the movement. After being crushed at the cost of tens of thousands of lives in Hama, Syria's Islamists have been an opposition in exile, increasingly alienated from politics inside the country. In a marriage of convenience, they even joined forces with defectors from the secular Ba'thist regime, such as the disaffected former vice president 'Abd al-Halim Khaddam at one time. Whilst elsewhere the Brotherhood's objective may be to win power, the Syrian Brotherhood's priority is to engineer a return from exile.

At the same time though, the Asad regime plays host to a pantheon of Islamist organisations from abroad such as Hamas, Hizballah and Islamic Jihad, welcomed by Damascus as disruptive assets in the service of Syrian foreign policy. Herein lies one salient feature of politics in the Arab world: regimes that tolerate minimal dissent from their own Islamists often play host to dissenters unwelcome elsewhere. Many of Syria's Brethren were welcomed in Jordan and Iraq, many of Egypt's were welcomed in Saudi Arabia, and many from all Arab states have found refuge in Europe.

The Brotherhood's presence in Europe raises a whole different set of issues. As dissidents fleeing authoritarian regimes, many of its activists have found refuge in Western democracies. Yet being a challenger to a despot does not make one a democrat. Whereas in the Arab world the Brotherhood's members represent sizeable constituencies in societies that are often un-enfranchised but should not be ignored, in Europe the opposite is often true. Here, though vocal, the Brotherhood does not represent the bulk of European Muslims but nevertheless receives a disproportionate amount of limelight. It is predominantly an organisation of the Arab educated classes, whilst most British Muslims, for example, are of South Asian origin and most German Muslims are of Turkish origin. Nevertheless, the Brotherhood's advocates market themselves as responsible interlocutors, while often remaining cagey about their precise relationship to the Brotherhood's ideology.

The Brotherhood's slipperiness has made it its own worst enemy. It disavows the revolutionary urgency of its best-known martyr, Sayyid Qutb; yet as its most accomplished ideologue he is too prominent to be rejected wholesale. Nor has any other Brotherhood ideologue been able to surpass Qutb; in fact the most sophisticated Islamist thinkers have tended to move away from the Brotherhood. It likewise presents itself as a bulwark against Al-Qaeda's militancy, yet it also advocates violent jihad in defence of Muslims in Iraq, Palestine and elsewhere. Its populism provokes anxiety. Committed militants see the Brotherhood as opportunists who cynically champion popular issues simply to rivet themselves to their popularity without ever actually standing in the frontline. In this way, the General Guide's promise to send 10,000 volunteers to defend Lebanon from the Israeli invasion in 2006 was nothing but flimsy bombast. Its practical role in supporting the Palestinian armed struggle or the Iraqi resistance has been minimal. On the other hand, endorsing violence whilst presenting itself as the face of 'moderation' and agitating for electoral participation – all this has encouraged its critics to view it as a Trojan horse opportunistically exploiting democratic electoral mechanisms whilst remaining profoundly undemocratic.

Such flak is not without substance. Pargeter rejects the argument that supporting the Brotherhood can serve as a vaccine that can preclude violent extremism. Experience shows that the reverse is true, she claims. In her exploration of issues that are both murky and subtle, the author treads carefully. The book's value lies in showing how experiences differ from country to country: e.g. during the Gulf War many branches of the Brotherhood appealed to popular sentiments and vocally denounced the American intervention, yet the Kuwaiti Brotherhood saw this as a colossal betrayal and even suspended its international affiliation. The movement's populism and sloganeering that 'Islam is the solution' account for the Brethren's longevity and popularity as much as its Janus-faced nature. Be it democracy, charity, or violence, whatever the Brotherhood does itself commit to, there are others from its ranks or surrounding who push such commitments further. Throughout the last century, the Brotherhood was an influential piece of political furniture in the Arab world. There is no sign of it dissipating; yet as time goes on and the organisation itself develops in different directions, uncertainty will doubtless persist as to the 'true' face of the Muslim Brotherhood.

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